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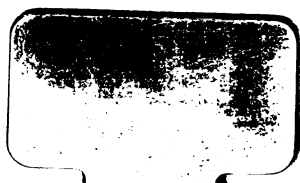
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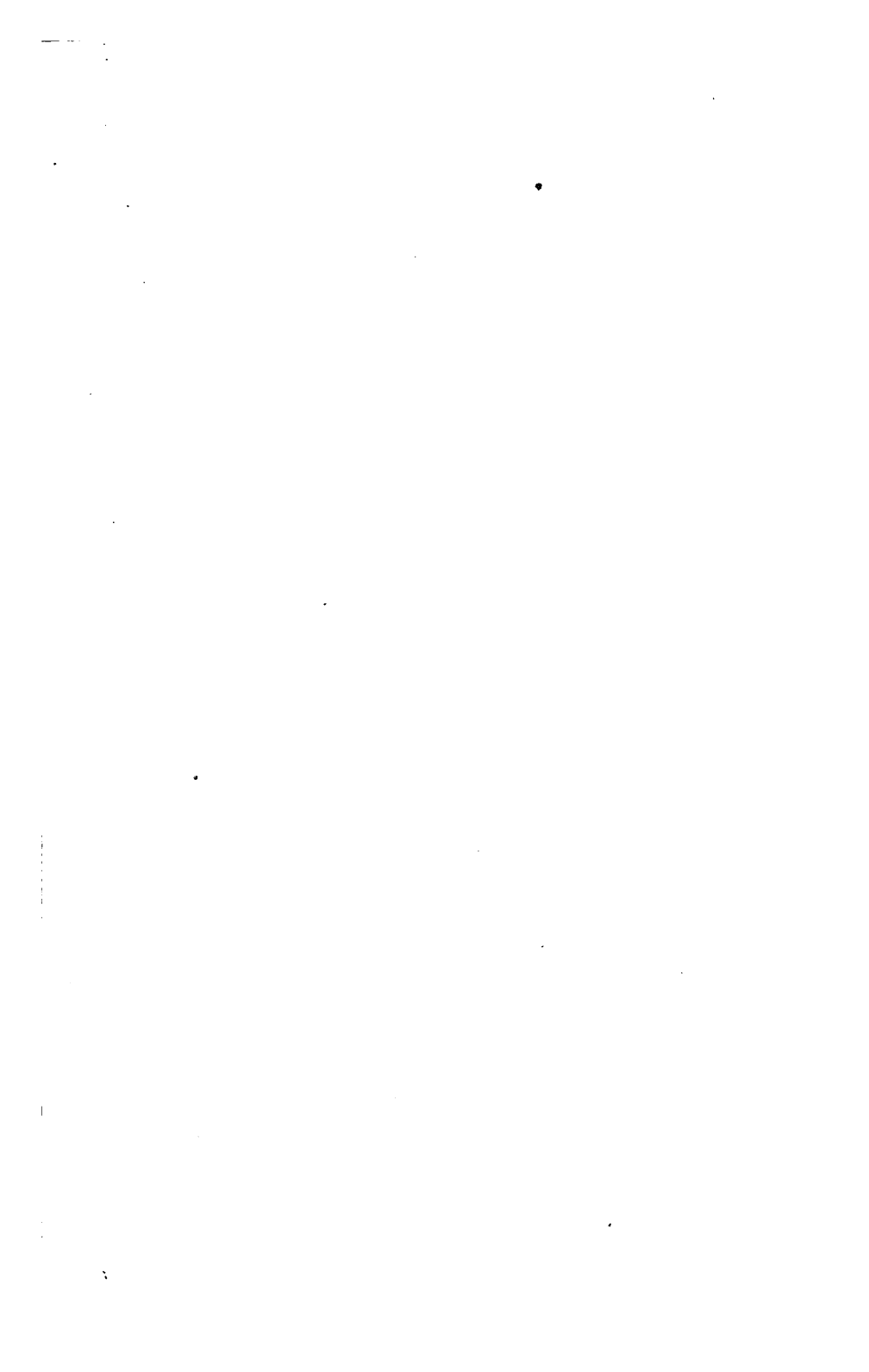
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LADY FLAVIA.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "LORD LYNN'S WIFE."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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LADY FLAVIA.



CHAPTER I.

COMING HOME.

"My lord is dead!" was the answer. There had been some delay in opening the Park-gates of Harbledown, and one of the occupants of the carriage had lowered the glass of the window nearest the lodge to ask a hasty question. The carriage entered the Park, and swept rapidly and smoothly along the well-kept road. It contained two persons—an elderly man, large and burly of frame, and a young girl, whose veiled face was averted from her travelling companion. There was a long and dreary

pause, and full ten minutes passed in silence, during which time nothing was to be heard but the dull roll of the wheels and the trampling of the horses' feet. The Park was in its summer beauty, with all its stately trees in full leaf; and though the July evening was deepening into night, an after-glow of crimson sunset rested like a glory upon the lofty purple moors in the background.

The young girl was the first to speak: "My poor father!" she said, with a smothered sob, behind the black veil. The simple words, and the accent of grief, might surely have claimed sympathy; but the only reply which they elicited was a start and an abrupt stare, singularly inappropriate, and almost vacant in its expression. And yet Mr. Royston was no fool, far from it. A tall, strong man, with traces of a reckless career depicted on a countenance at once fierce and shrewd, and yet withal

unquestionably that of a gentleman. He was a restless traveller; and as his companion with a low sigh relapsed into silence, he evinced his impatience by pulling his long grey moustaches, and drumming on the glass of the window with his powerful fingers. As the long frontage of the stately house became visible, and the carriage was nearing the hall-door, Mr. Royston looked eagerly out, and exclaimed in a harsh tone :

“At last! You are at home, Lady Flavia; pray recollect yourself, and what you have to do.”

To which a gentle and broken voice lowly replied: “I can think of nothing—but my dear father.”

At this instant the carriage stopped. It had evidently been expected, for at the same moment the hall-doors were noiselessly opened, and numerous servants were seen, some of whom came forward to receive the travellers; and when the latter had alighted,

a groom of the chambers stepped forward, and bowing low, said, in a hushed tone of voice :

“My Lady Flavia Clare, I presume ? I grieve to tell your ladyship that my lord, the Earl of Mortlake, is no more. Lord and Lady Hythe—that is, I should say, the Earl and Countess—are awaiting your ladyship.”

Lady Flavia, followed by Mr. Royston, was at once ushered into the Vandyck drawing-room, where she was to be received by the new owners of Harbledown. It was a strange welcome for a daughter to meet with, in the house that, six short hours ago, had been her father's. But that father lay dead up-stairs ; and hall and lands, and the very title, belonged already to his second-cousin, hitherto known to the world as John, Lord Hythe, but on whom the Mortlake coronet had now devolved of right. The new earl and countess were, as has

been said, in the small drawing-room that took its name from some three or four pictures of stately personages, beruffed and bejewelled, with the cloth-of-gold vests, and rich sword-hilts, and haughty, clever faces, that Vandyck drew so well. These were notable ancestors of the Clare family, and beneath one of them stood the new master of Harbledown, a Clare too, but not the least like his forefather's portrait. A plain, middle-aged gentleman, with a kindly smile. There, too, was the new countess—of six hours' standing—a comely matron of fifty, who had been handsome in her youth, and whose face was still pleasant to look upon. There was a third person present, too, when Lady Flavia was announced, a dapper little man, with light whiskers—Mr. Hart, the late earl's law-agent.

Lady Mortlake was the first to come forward to greet the orphaned girl.

"My dear," she began, "this is a sad

welcome home;" and as she said so, she held out her hand; then, seeing how slight and fragile was the figure before her, and what a youthful, almost childish face it was that was disclosed, when the new-comer threw back her veil, the countess drew Lady Flavia towards her, and kissed her, in sheer pity for her lonely state. A sweet little creature, small enough for a fairy almost, and graceful as Titania herself, with a delicate complexion, like a dainty shell, rosepink and white, the soft colour coming and going with every varying emotion; a wonderful wealth of raven-black hair, soft as silk, and falling naturally into heavy curls; and great dark-blue eyes, gentle as those of a fawn—eyes that were dimmed by rising tears just then. Lady Flavia was eighteen, but she looked younger. It was a touching sight to see her standing there among strangers in her dead father's home, with the marks of tears yet glisten-

ing on the round young cheek, from which they had been hastily brushed away. The countess, a good soul, warmed at once towards the fatherless, motherless girl, whom she now saw for the first time.

“I know what you must feel, my dear,” she whispered; “but it will be a comfort to you to hear that he died without pain, and in a happier frame of mind than—he left you his blessing, my poor child, but—I will not talk more of it at present. How tired you must be with your journey!”

Meanwhile, the earl had been shaking hands with Mr. Royston.

“We are very much obliged to you, sir, for your kindness in undertaking to escort Lady Flavia over to England at such short notice. It was very inconvenient to you, I am afraid; but poor Mortlake had put it off so long, that there was no time to despatch a proper person to bring the poor

young lady home, and so we were obliged to trespass on——”

“No trespass at all, my lord,” said Mr. Royston, with bluff good-humour; “we had all got to be so fond of your niece, that it was a pleasure to me to render her any little service in my power.”

“Lady Flavia is not my niece, I wish she was, for then—— But as it is, Heaven knows what is to become of her,” said the earl, in a sort of half-soliloquy, speaking in a low undertone that Mr. Royston could hardly catch; and then Lord Mortlake came forward to shake hands with his young cousin, and in a good-natured, commonplace fashion, asked a question or two about her journey, her fatigue, and so forth. His heart, too was much softened towards this poor, young, desolate thing, who, in her simplicity of nature and bringing-up, did not seem to be fully aware of the extent of her own desolation; but Englishmen do

not, as a rule, wear their hearts upon their sleeves, and John, Lord Mortlake, was English to the backbone. He could not for his very life attempt to play consoler to anybody. A shade came over Mr. Royston's face as he listened to the earl's last words, but it soon cleared off again, and the usual expression of defiant and blunt shrewdness succeeded to that momentary gloom. Standing there, as he did, and towering over the heads of the group around him, he looked singularly out of keeping with the rest of the *dramatis personæ*. True it was that he looked a gentleman, which Mr. Ebenezer Hart, the attorney, certainly did not. But there was something about Mr. Royston that repelled rather than attracted, though what that something might be, it was hard to say. His attire was neat; his person was well cared for; his hale face was clean shaven, all but the heavy gray moustache that half concealed his firm

mouth ; and the faint scent of cheap cigars that hung about him was too subdued to cause much umbrage. It must have been the audacious boldness of those unabashed bull-eyes ; the manner in which the veins stood out like knotted cordage on the broad low forehead ; the deep crows-feet that seamed the face, which inspired distrust in not a few beholders towards Brand Royston, sometime of Royston Hall, Esquire. The lawyer, however, succeeded in drawing off the earl's attention alike from Lady Flavia and Mr. Royston ; indeed, Mr. Hart was very busy and important, and by no means willing to permit himself to slip out of the notice of his future great client. He had been man of business to the late peer for fourteen years, and hoped to retain his lucrative agency under the new reign ; indeed, as he was used to say, nobody but himself thoroughly understood the ins and outs, the leases, fines, renewals, and mano-

rial rights of the Harbledown property. So he drew Lord Mortlake aside, eagerly whispering to him of papers to be docketed, desks and cabinets to be sealed up, sums of money in local banks, plate locked away in iron safes, family jewels which might be reset, and so forth.

Then the countess kindly insisted that Lady Flavia must be tired to death, and stood in need of refreshment and repose. Her rooms, Lady Mortlake said, had been got ready for her arrival. Very pretty rooms they were. The bed-chamber, compared with which the "bowers" of mediæval maidens were but a cross between barn and cell, opened into a dressing-room on one side, a small sitting-room on the other. The great mirrors were such as no Queen of Beauty, in the old spear-breaking days ever saw, even in her dreams. Sweet bright flowers, Honiton and Flanders lace, silk hangings, and tasteful toys from Paris

and Italy, were to be seen everywhere. The windows looked over the gardens, grand in the pomp and glory of their mid-summer bloom. The suite was known by the name of the Pink Rooms, from the colour of the delicate paper and curtains. Into these rooms, whither the trunks that held her modest wardrobe had already been conveyed, Lady Flavia was inducted by the housekeeper.

‘O my lady, but this is a sad day for us all. My poor dear master—my lord, that is—that was; and as kind a nobleman as ever lived; and you, poor lamb, begging your ladyship’s pardon, but I remember you when you were a little trot; but I daresay your ladyship has forgotten old Benson.’

As the housekeeper ran on, her listener pressed her handkerchief to her eyes, and after a short space, said: “Oh, yes, I remember Benson well. I am glad to find

an old face left—— But everything seems so strange at home now.”

There was something so touching and childish in the manner in which these last few words were spoken, that they went straight to Mrs. Benson's heart, and there were genuine tears in her eyes as she busied herself in assisting Lady Flavia to remove her travelling attire; for the earl's daughter had brought no maid with her; and, as the housekeeper proceeded to explain, in the confusion that prevailed, there had not been time to provide an attendant for her ladyship.

Dinner had been delayed nearly two hours after the usual time, and it was nine o'clock before it was announced. By this hour Mr. Hart had reluctantly relinquished the task of examining and sealing up of papers and valuables, to him a labour of love, and had bowed himself out. Mr. Royston, who had accepted the earl's

hospitable offer of a room for as long as he might wish to remain at Harbledown, sat down to dinner with Lord and Lady Mortlake; but Lady Flavia preferred to remain in her own rooms.

Some hours afterwards, as the windows of Harbledown were darkened one by one, two rooms only remained lighted: one was the hushed chamber in which, amid wax-lights arranged in formal order, Francis, seventh earl of Mortlake, lay sleeping death's awful sleep, on his bed of state, with the drowsy watchers beside him, and the rich pall spread over his lifeless limbs. The other was the pretty Pink Room, where a slight figure in a white wrapper sat crouched in a large arm-chair. The beautiful face was there still, but a strange and undefinable expression had replaced the look of child-like innocence that it had worn before the world. The cold grey of morning was creeping over the eastern sky

before Lady Flavia retired to rest. As she laid her head upon the pillow, she murmured: "Harbledown is entailed, I know; but the Leicestershire and Sussex estates were free, and in any case, I am Lady Flavia Clare."

Strange words these for so young a girl.

CHAPTER II.

LOOKS BACK.

FRANCIS, seventh Earl of Mortlake, had been an unlucky man his whole life long. If marriage be a lottery, and birth—as the believers in the doctrine of averages tell us—a lottery too, then, to all appearance, the late master of Harbledown, of Melshot Friars, in the county of Leicester, and of Cupley Lees, in the county of Sussex, was a man to be envied. Rich, healthy, and a peer of England, Francis Clare might reasonably have been set down among those who have drawn the fairest prizes from Fortune's wheel. But of what use is a prize when, like the apples of Sodom, it

turns to dust and ashes in your grasp! Even at Eton, his young companions called the boy-earl Unlucky Frank. No other Etonian came in for such frequent punishment for peccadilloes of his own or others, for such capsizings in skiffs, such bruised fingers at cricket, and for all kinds of miscellaneous misfortunes. The same reputation tracked Lord Mortlake to Oxford, and thence into the world of London. He had tolerable brains, a very warm heart, and an almost feminine sensitiveness of feeling; about as perilous ballast as a young nobleman, who had the ill-luck to have become his own master too early, could carry forth with him on life's voyage.

Disappointed, deceived, and baffled in all ways—political, ethical, and sporting—Francis of Mortlake made a great effort to gain the quiet happiness that had eluded him as yet. He was sick of the statesmen

who cajoled him for the sake of his proxy and his influence ; weary of the friends who made him a stepping-stone to success, and laughed at his Utopianism ; tired of keeping up, for his trainer's benefit, a stud of fine horses that always ought to win the Derby, the Oaks, and the Leger, but somehow never did. He had one hope left : he would marry some good girl, well brought up in a well-ordered household, and never exposed to the hot furnace-breath of a London season ; and he would teach, guide, and guard this innocent bride, his model wife, who would look up to him, and depend upon him in all things, and his domestic bliss would be perfect. Other men besides Lord Mortlake have reasoned thus, and have reduced their theories to practice with greater or less success. Unlucky Frank had his usual luck in this, the great turning-point of life.

He married a vicar's daughter, a demure

little creature, who had never so much as danced at a county ball, and whose greatest dissipation had been the mild excitement of a fancy-bazaar or a feast of the school-children. Very pretty, and very submissive to her excellent parents, really most worthy people, who had brought up their nine children with praiseworthy care, was little Ellen of the vicarage. Her downcast eyes were as blue and almost as round as a doll's; her complexion was waxen clear, her temper of the mildest, and there was a meek simplicity in what little she did say, for she had been strictly trained in accordance with wholesome rules of old-world discipline. She was ten years younger than Lord Mortlake. It was such a match as Aristotle himself would have approved.

Once fairly Countess of Mortlake, the mask dropped from Ellen's pretty face. Or perhaps it would be fairer to say that her nature expanded, now that the pressure of

authority was taken off. The modest daisy was transmuted into a gaudy hot-house flower of flaunting hues and arrogant beauty. No doubt the germs of arrant worldliness were lying latent in that little soul, at once so silly and so sly. At any rate, Ellen, Lady Mortlake, developed into one of the most finished flirts that London, or even Paris, had ever beheld. Here was a rude shock to the fond husband's hopes. He had looked forward to a domestic Paradise, in which his country-bred Eve, shrinking from the glare of society, as something too dazzling for her gentle eyes, should be wholly devoted to himself. And, to do him justice, he loved her very dearly. He had learned to love her, and had thus made himself her slave. He struggled, but to no purpose. His Ellen, as she boasted to her confidants of both sexes, could twist him round her little finger. When tears and smiles failed, it was found that the young

wife could stamp her little foot upon the floor, and say stinging things withal. She had a temper, and a petulant one, though it had been dormant so long. Why not? We should never judge of people without giving due weight to their surroundings. At the vicarage, Lord Mortlake's wife had been a chrysalis; but now she unfolded her starry wings, rose-coloured and gold-be-spangled, and flew forth a butterfly of the brightest hues. She dragged the weak earl back to the haunts of fashion, and kept him there.

It is needless minutely to follow the career of a pair so ill assorted. With a different kind of wife, Lord Mortlake might probably have been a happy man. With a different kind of husband, Lady Mortlake might possibly have been a good woman. She wanted a firm judicious hand to guide her, beset by temptations and giddy as she was. She gave her husband much pain,

and at last, but not till years had gone by, the crisis came. The poor glittering butterfly besmirched its gold-powdered wings in the mire at last. The moth flew too near the fatal blaze that was to consume it. Ellen, Countess of Mortlake, fled from her husband's house. A Russian diplomatist of rank was the tempter and the sharer of her flight. It was in Paris that this scandal occurred; and when the news reached Pall Mall, the verdict of the clubs was, that "it was a wonder the lady had not bolted long ago;" that the runaway wife was no loss, and that "Mortlake was well rid of her." Everybody thought that the earl would get a divorce, and marry again, more prudently than before.

Lord Mortlake did no such thing. He was stunned by the blow. Vain and flighty he had known his wife to be, and had groaned in secret over the knowledge; but criminal—that was hard to bear. Proofs

were but too plentiful. In her hurry or carelessness, the wretched woman had left whole heaps of letters behind her, in desk, drawer, and portfolio, frivolous heartless trash some of them, plain evidence of guilt the rest. By means of those letters, the betrayed husband was able to realise for the first time how worthless was the heart of her whom he had taken to his bosom, and to learn that, little worth as that heart was, it had never been his at all. He was spoken of, often, in that precious correspondence, with levity and contempt. He was a dupe from the first to the last, hoodwinked and tormented by a despicable woman, who despised him. No honest man, going back, after the day's toil, to any the meanest hearth where the smiles of an honest wife awaited him, but was immeasurably more to be envied than Francis, Earl of Mortlake, as he sat, with his head buried in his hands, while that accursed pile of

scented and tinted notes spread their musky pages before him.

People in London heard vaguely of the earl's further proceedings. It was town-talk that Lord Mortlake had challenged the Russian, and that the Russian had declined to stand within twelve paces of the pistol of one whom he had so cruelly wronged. A Frenchman under similar circumstances would have come forward at the first summons to kill or be killed, and in either case would have satisfied his conscience; but the point of honour is said to be differently viewed by the Czar's subjects. It was also said that Lord Mortlake could not endure the sight of his daughter and only child, Lady Flavia Clare, whom her mother had deserted, and who was hardly eight years of age. Why he, who was a kind-hearted man, should have found the presence of this innocent child painful to him, it was hard to say; but it was conjectured that she

reminded him overmuch, by her unconscious gestures and playful bearing, of the woman who had blighted his life. Then Pall Mall heard vaguely that Mortlake had placed his daughter in some French convent, in an out-of-the-way place, and had himself come home to shut himself up at Harbledown, keep his friends at arm's-length, and, in a word, to bury himself alive; but every one agreed that such an abnormal state of things could not last, and that in a few months the earl would "get out of his sulks," and appear in the world again.

Every one was egregiously wrong. Lord Mortlake's shadow never again darkened the doors of club-house, or House of Lords, or Belgravian mansion. He lived pertinaciously in solitude, neither paid nor received visits, and was considered in his county as an English edition of Timon of Athens. But as man must do something, this soured, unhappy peer became

a model landowner; and there were no cottages so free from damp and discomfort, from ague and typhus, as those on the estates of Francis of Mortlake; no farms in more splendid order, no landlord more beloved. But he never rallied. The wounds he had received were too deep for a man of his morbid delicacy of sentiment ever to get over them. They may have healed in part, for Time is a great healer, but he never could be got to parade his scars before the world. His wife died. On her death-bed, she wrote to him. He received the blotted scrawl, unsigned, that prayed for forgiveness, along with an announcement that the writer was gone beyond the reach of earthly pardon. He never saw his child's face again. He provided for her maintenance and education liberally enough; but he never visited her, never wrote to her, never permitted her to write to him. The earl's letters were addressed

to the Lady Superior of the convent, not to little Lady Flavia Clare. The latter grew up from a child to a woman ; but the obstinate resolve of Lord Mortlake was never relaxed, never till he felt death's icy fingers busy with his heart-strings, when the frost of prejudice and morbid feeling at last gave way, and he desired to see his child's innocent face beside his dying couch. But the change of purpose came too late, and the last desire of Francis, Earl of Mortlake, was ungratified. It is possible that had the earl lived one day longer, one short span of twenty-four hours of our mortal time, great results might have followed, and much sorrow, and trouble, and grief have been eliminated from this checkered history. But he died ; and his eyes closed without looking upon the face of his long-banished daughter. Lady Flavia found no living father to welcome her beneath that father's roof.

CHAPTER III.

STILL OF THE PAST.

THE convent of Our Lady of Mount Carmel is by far the largest building in the village of Grèsnez-les-cloches, a few kilomètres distant from the town and royal demesne of St. Germain. Royal, national, imperial, the forest and the château had changed names many a time since Louis the Magnificent gave house-room and pension there to fugitive James of England. It was termed "royal," when a frightened little English girl, whom the French folks surrounding her alternately called *Mademoiselle Flavie* and *Miladi Clare*, was brought down from Paris to the neighbouring hamlet of Grèsnez-les-cloches, and there,

in the *parloir* of the Carmelite convent, formally consigned to the charge of the Dame Supérieure.

The convent was, like most French convents, a fair, tall building of white stone, a hybrid as to its architecture, between the Roman style of Francis I. and the flamboyant Gothic; and as to its adornments, well supplied with statues over gate and porch, and gilt crosses that glittered in the sun on gable and roof, till the eyes ached that looked on them. It was very solidly built of the best masonry, with very big blocks of the most evenly-hewn stone, accurately cemented together, and with the mightiest beams of sound heart of oak timber; and from the lead on the roof to the sturdy piles and squat arches of the foundation, nothing was stinted, or scamped, or deficient, as in our contract-built edifices nearer home. It was a fine mansion, meant to last, and it possessed a tuneful peal of

bells, thus keeping up the ancient reputation of the village of Grèsnez-les-cloches, as distinguished from the twin-village of Grèsnez-Vignoble, higher up the hillside.

The convent was not old, however. It had been founded in the devout reign of his Majesty King Charles X., a prince who, as Count of Artois, had sown a plentiful crop of wild oats, but who cared for little else, in his kingly later days, than Mother-Church and her interests. The site chosen in this case was a good one, occupying the ground where a former convent of Carmelites, sacked and burned in the revolutionary times between '89 and '93, had stood. Madame herself, though not exactly a princess of saintly character, had become lay-patroness of the new community, and the contributions of the fashionable faithful poured in fast as the building progressed. But, alas! when the work-people were giving the last decorative touches, and a

day had been named on which the Cardinal Archbishop should consecrate the chapel, in presence of all the blue blood of the Faubourg St. Germain, the July of 1830 came round, and spoiled the programme. Instead of kneeling in the outer court to receive the archbishop's blessing, glaziers and gilders, and grainers and joiners seized muskets and pikes, and went noisily off to Paris, there to help in killing his majesty's guards; and though, under the Laodicean reign of Louis Philippe, the convent was really established on a practical footing, the zeal of the society was but lukewarm; gifts flowed sparingly in, and the nuns were glad to eke out their income by taking in young-lady pupils as boarders, and not only boarders, but Protestant boarders, especially in such a case as that in which Milord, the Comte de Mortlake, pair d'Angleterre, was desirous to place his only child, for an indefinite number of

years, under the tutelage of the Lady-Superior. It was made a condition, that there should be no attempt at conversion ; and as the English pupil was by far the most profitable of all her youthful charges, the Reverend Mother—the title of Abbess has been dropped in French establishments of this nature, but the old-fashioned phrases of respectful address are still kept up in some of them—gave her word that Lady Flavia's Protestantism should be undisturbed. She kept her word loyally. The deserted girl was neither persecuted nor neglected. Her health was cared for, and her education looked after, and she had masters and mistresses, and was taught all that, according to the standard of a polite French system of tuition, a young damsel needs to know.

But those years spent under the lead-sheathed roof of the convent of Our Lady of Carmel were wofully dull ones. Amuse-

ment does not enter into a scheme of conventual bringing up ; and if the other girls, who had dear friends at home, and pleasant holidays spent in the family circle, were used to count the hours till their release, it must have been worse for the one pupil who never was visited, and never had any vacation at all, only the great convent garden, with its high walls, for what the good sisters called "recreation." When Lady Flavia Clare was about sixteen years of age, her health began to suffer, and Dr. Perinet spoke very seriously to the Lady-Superior on his young patient's behalf. The *jeune Anglaise*, he said, was pining herself to death, like a bird in a cage, and, as such birds often do, would die, if not indulged with more air and light. She was the only English girl among the boarders, and her companions just then were few, and not very agreeable—two gaunt demoiselles from the Faubourg, who had sharp

elbows, and leaden complexions, and vinegar faces, and who had been so *bien élevé* by the poorest and sternest of parents, that they were ready to renounce the world and its pleasures, of which, poor things, they had seen but little, and were soon to begin their novitiate. These, and two or three little chattering creatures, with a passion for sweetmeats and *galette*, were all the company that Lady Flavia had, except the nuns, who were mostly placid women, with very few ideas.

The doctor, who was a shrewd and kindly physician, had won his young patient's confidence enough to be able to assure the Superior that the youthful Miladi must have some change, some amusement; that she was longing for friends, and that she would be all the better for an introduction to a family whose acquaintance the doctor had lately made, and whose medical attendant he was. This was a family of her own

country-people, the only English household nearer than St. Germain; and they had recently settled themselves in a large old house, the Château des Roches, about one mile from the convent. The name of this family was Royston. It consisted of an elderly gentleman, M. Royston; of Madame, his wife; and of a niece, Mademoiselle Adela Burt, a girl of nearly the same age as Lady Flavia. There was also a son, but him Dr. Perinet had never seen, and he was believed to be in India with his regiment. The family were *comme il faut*; Mrs. Royston, a very soft-hearted woman; and the doctor was sure that they would be very kind to Lady Flavia, and very careful of her, if she were occasionally permitted to visit them.

The Superior was a conscientious personage. She had every confidence in the good old doctor: but it was incumbent on her to be very careful with regard to her

boarders. Indeed, the rules of the house were excessively strict, and visits, except in the case of near relatives, were forbidden. But the daughter of M. le Comte de Mortlake, whose cheques came so regularly, and were so comfortable in amount, was an exceptional person in the eyes of the Reverend Mother; and there was no denying that the girl's cheeks were getting pale, and her eyes sadly large and bright, though she was very young, and small of stature for her years. So Madame took what she called her "informations;" and hearing that the Roystons were respectable folks who paid their bills, she gave her consent. Dr. Perinet introduced the English pupil to the Roystons, and from that day forth, Lady Flavia became a frequent visitor at their house. Once, twice, or thrice in the week, as the weather might serve, Lady Flavia walked across the great meadow, and up the sandy cross-road, in whose high

banks were planted pollard willows, monsters of ugliness from incessant loppings, and so into the broad highway, where the slim poplar-trees were set at intervals, like soldiers on parade, and passed the mill and the loose stone-walls of the vineyards, and so to the great outer gateway of the château where the Roystons lived. Not alone, of course. Old Sœur Nanon, the portress, one of several religious persons of an inferior social grade who attended to the poultry-yard, the dairy, and the laundry of the convent, and who were servants in all but name, being styled "sister," but always addressing the lady-Carmelites as "Madame," accompanied the English pupil, and fetched her back at an appointed time. If the hour were after sunset, as was sometimes the case in winter, the gardener went too with his lantern and a knotted stick; not that this last was necessary, since not a soul in the arrondissement would have

harméd or molested any person belonging to the convent of Our Lady of Carmel.

This intimacy with people of her own country, who spoke that dear English tongue she had half forgotten in the long years during which she had only used it to a language-mistress in school-hours, was a new life to the English girl. The very wildness and slovenly look of the great neglected garden that belonged to the ruinous old château was refreshing to Lady Flavia, after the terrible neatness and inexorable order to which she had been accustomed at the convent; for the Superior was punctilious in matters of discipline; and floors were waxed, stones scrubbed, and walks swept, as regularly as the bells rang for Angelus and Vespers. Nothing was out of its place, from the milk-pans in the dairy, the brass of which shone like gold with excess of burnishing, to the trim gravel-walks that ran through the formal vege-

table beds and espaliers of the walled garden. It was all very proper, no doubt, but excessively wearisome to a buoyant young mind, that stiff mechanical tidiness and primness at the house of the Carmelites; whereas, at the Château des Roches, all was delightfully shabby, decayed, and suggestive of romantic notions, which found no pabulum in the prosaic convent.

There was the château, a crazy old place, not entirely furnished, and with more than one uninhabitable room, by reason of the unsoundness of the steep slated roof; but still a picturesque house, with its lofty stone turrets, topped by groaning weather-cocks, and the high dormer windows twinkling in the sunlight. Over its doorway were to be seen traces of a stone escutcheon of arms, sadly chipped and defaced by the hammers and crow-bars of the revolutionary mobs of '92. It had a grass-grown courtyard, with a choked-up fountain in the middle of it, a

range of empty stables, a stone tower that looked strong enough to stand a siege, but which was merely the old seigneurial dovecot, on whose roof the hereditary pigeons might yet be seen, though in diminished numbers, pruning their shining feathers, or stretching out their pretty necks, and cooing soft music on sunny mornings. Better still, the château possessed a very large garden, long neglected, and in the most charming condition of overgrown desolation possible. There were fish-ponds, but they were so choked with matted weeds, and so coated with green scum, that the mud-loving carp below could scarcely find a clear patch of water wherein to lie and bask in hot weather, with their broad sides and golden armour gleaming through the reeds. There were fruit-trees, and there were flowers, but so mixed up with tall weeds and straggling bushes, as to be all but indistinguishable. The trees had low

branches that barred up many of the mossy paths, deep-cushioned with last year's leaves; the lawns were mere swampy prairies of rank grass, and the whole place was a wilderness. Especially was this the case with one portion of the garden, where the great sun-dial stood, and where a mouldering old summer-house existed. There were many box and holly trees thereabouts, which had once been carefully cut into crosses, peacocks, dragons, and what not; but no shears had cut these bushy shrubs for many a year, and the boughs were interlaced, and the clipped trees mere monstrous fantasies, grown out of all shape; while around them had sprung up tall hemlocks and thistles, and coarse grasses, and tufted reeds. This was the most remote nook of the garden, and here rose out of the soil the gaunt grey rocks, sticking up out of the earth like the bones of an ill-buried giant, that gave name to the

château. The Roystons called this place, the Tangle.

Altogether, the house was not a very valuable property, and belonging as it did to a rich proprietor, who lived in Paris, and cared very little about this outlying scrap of his possessions, it was left to be managed by a notary at St. Germain, and the Roystons paid but a low rent for it. The latter were not very particular as to the fashion in which they were housed, so that the rent *was* a low one. For the Roystons—— But they are too important in this history to be introduced otherwise than at the beginning of a chapter.

CHAPTER IV.

BACK TO ENGLAND.

BRAND ROYSTON, Esquire, J.P. and D.P.L., of Royston Hall, in the county of York, had been a notable person in his day. That he was of a good old family, allied to the most ancient names in Yorkshire, was what his bitterest enemies, and he had many, never denied. Indeed, from time immemorial, the Roystons of Royston Hall had eaten of the fat and drunk of the strong—rich squires and men of worship in their native county. That was all over now. Royston Hall, and its eleven thousand acres of good arable and pasture land, had been brought to the hammer, and

knocked down to a Leeds clothier. The heir of the old name and the old place—he whose birth had been hailed by bell-ringing in the three parishes, and whose coming of age had been celebrated with roasting of oxen, broaching of beer-casks, and huzzaing of tenantry, was smoking cheap tobacco, wearing old coats, and leading a hide-and-seek life in France, on the little income that his wife's father, a commercial man of some prudence, had prevailed on him to settle on her for her separate use.

Such was the climax to which dogs, horses, chicken-hazard, blind-hookey, and racing of maggots across polished dinner-tables for heavy bets, had conducted Brand Royston, only son and heir of Thomas Royston and Lady Caroline his wife, both as honest and stupid folks as ever lived and died respected and worthy of respect. Not that the new and last squire of the Royston line was a fool. There were not a few who

were ready to proclaim him the customary antithesis of fools. He had brains and daring too, and plenty of the north-country father-wit, but his recklessness knew no bounds. Brand Royston, as the knowing ones said, with an ominous shake of the head, was "at all in the ring." He was known on every race-course in England, and at every gaming-table. He rode steeple-chases, entered his horses for every conceivable stake, hedging, backing his opinion, betting secretly and openly, and having a finger in many and many a racing-pie of dubious quality. Had he stuck to the turf, people said he might "still have done," though his name began to be mixed up with ugly stories. But he was equally ready to risk his thousands on fighting-men and fighting-cocks, on rat-killing terriers, on snarling mastiffs in a pit, on his own skill in a pigeon-match. Cards and dice, betting-books and extrava-

gant living, such were the demons to which he sold himself; and they used him as they did many another Faust in top-boots and Belcher cravat, buoying him up for a while, to sink him the more hopelessly at last.

Mr. Royston fled from England with the bailiffs at his heels, and his name was in the list of outlaws proclaimed by the sheriff of Middlesex. The crash had come, and the game was up. He was almost as poor in reputation as in purse. Very queer tales were told of his turf-manceuvres; of young fellows who had been proud to keep company with so celebrated a man, and had paid dearly for the honour of Rattling Brand Royston's acquaintance; of gallant race-horses "nobbled" on the night before the running, of poisoned beans, of pails of water administered just before the bell rang for saddling in the paddock on the course, and of jockeys bribed to "pull" the favou-

rite back at the crisis of victory. But if there were truth in these tales, at any rate it must have been diamond cut diamond, and Mr. Royston had met with wilier or cooler rogues than himself, for others grew rich, and he poor as Job. Hounds, horses, acres, and mansion, all went from the prodigal, and the haunts of his prosperity knew him no more.

With all Brand Royston's faults, he was hospitably inclined, and his wife was very glad to welcome Lady Flavia beneath the shelter of her rickety roof-tree. Mrs. Royston, as many English residents at Brussels, Tours, Dinan, and other resorts of British exiles, had been pleased to remark, was her husband's guardian angel. But she was a very timorous guardian angel, and weak on the wing withal, and could not save a spendthrift so obstinately bent on ruining himself as the ex-squire. It was due to her, however, that the ruin was not

more complete. The family had nothing to live on, excepting the little sum in consols that had been settled on the wife at her marriage, and which produced a smaller annual income than Royston had once paid as a salary to his stud-groom. Elizabeth Burt had brought her husband a larger dowry than this, the only remaining fraction of it. Forty thousand pounds of hers had gone the way that all guineas went in Brand's desperate hands; but Mrs. Royston never repined, never would listen to a word against the husband who had brought her down from affluence to poverty. She was, as has been said, of a commercial family, and her father, an honest alderman of York, had thought it a proud promotion for a child of his to marry the heir of Royston. He lived to pay his son-in-law's debts once or twice, but died before the final breakdown of the household. Mrs. Royston accepted her fallen fortunes very philosophi-

cally. It was due to her that the bills were so regularly paid. She managed to spread out the meagre income in a surprising manner, made one franc do duty for two, bargained and haggled over her marketing, and took care, somehow, that her Brand should always have buttons on his shirts, and a savoury dish or two at dinner-time.

Mrs. Royston was really a very good wife, and a well-intentioned woman, although her weak will could never cope with the headstrong resolution of her husband. Of him she stood in great awe. She cowered before him, spaniel-like, when he was angry, which was not seldom. Often she would let her work drop on her knee, needle, thread, and all; when she heard the squire's heavy tread without, and his loud voice a little louder than usual. She was, indeed, a very nervous, easily alarmed lady; and the one personal luxury she allowed herself was the occasional attend-

ance of a doctor to prescribe for what was more a mental than a bodily ailment, but which she called neuralgia. Dr Perinet, who knew pretty well how far she contrived to stretch a slender income, and how active she and her niece were in household duties, had a great respect and compassion for Mrs. Royston, and pocketed her three-franc fees as demurely as if they had been golden louis. He was quite pleased to be the means of making the family at the old château and the English boarder at the convent acquainted with each other. The former household consisted of four persons when first Lady Flavia began to visit at the mildewed old château—namely, the squire; his patient wife; her niece, Adela Burt, whose father had ruined himself in speculations, and left his daughter penniless to her aunt's care; and Grosse Jeanne, who wore sabots, and was cook, housemaid, and hen-wife in one.

But eighteen months after Lord Mortlake's daughter had become intimate at the château, a new member was added to the family circle, and it became necessary to supplement Grosse Jeanne's services by hiring a country girl to assist in the housework. Captain Basil Royston, the only son and only child, was coming home from India. This young gentleman came accordingly, and seemed in no hurry to go away again. His occupation, indeed, was gone, like Othello's, but for reasons less deserving of sympathy. A court-martial at Poonah had expressed a very decided opinion on the propriety of expunging the name of Basil Royston from the Army List, and the commander-in-chief had been graciously pleased to give the sentence his heartiest approval. The why and wherefore would entail a long and intricate story, in which cards and billiards, disputed bets, orders on a regimental paymaster, brandy-pawnee,

and intimidation of freshly-arrived griffins, were curiously mixed up together. Three or four names beside that of the captain received no great accession of honour from the light thus thrown on these queer transactions, and there were those who called Royston "poor fellow," and insisted that he had been made a scapegoat of in behalf of others whose influence was greater than his. But at any rate, the black-sheep was driven from the flock; and Captain Basil Royston, with no right to his military designation, came back to kick his heels at the château; and the place seemed doubly dreary when the young man's handsome sullen face was seen perpetually about it.

Had Captain Royston been at his father's house when first Lady Flavia's pale cheeks and spiritless air warned the experienced doctor that some remedy not in the pharmacopœia was necessary, Dr. Perinet would have looked further afield for the means of

amusing her. The old French physician would not have reconciled it to himself to introduce a girl, at her susceptible age, and with her large expectations, into a family that numbered among its members such a good-looking idler as that ex-captain of Lancers. As it was, when the doctor paid one of his rare professional calls to Mrs. Royston, and found Lady Flavia and her young friend singing a duet to the accompaniment of the jingling old piano, and saw Basil Royston's tawny moustaches and handsome gloomy countenance a few yards off, as their owner leaned indolently against the mantel-piece, beating time to the music with the lash of his frayed riding-whip, the doctor's grey eyebrows rose into an arch of surprise; and the Superior received a quiet hint, that perhaps it would be safer if her young pupil's visits to the château were rather fewer and briefer for the future.

The Superior was not slow to take the

hint. She was horror-struck at the very idea of an attachment springing up between a boarder of hers and a young man, even if the former had but a face for her fortune, and the latter were rich as Rothschild, and virtuous enough to deserve the Monthyon prize. But between the only daughter of the Earl of Mortlake—*une héritière quoi!*—and a *méchant garçon* of a cashiered officer without a *sou*, it was atrocious. Dr. Perinet had some trouble to prevent the scandalised Carmelite from insisting on a total breaking off of the acquaintance between Miladi Clare and the Roystons; as it was, Lady Flavia was much less frequently to be seen beyond the convent walls than before; and on various pretexts, the Superior contrived to keep her from being so much with the family at the château as she had previously been. Indeed, the convent was less irksome to Lord Mortlake's daughter than heretofore, for there was now another English boarder,

a sweet-tempered girl named Amy Ford, and those two had become fast friends.

The year in which Miss Ford became a pupil at the Carmelite convent was the last of Lord Mortlake's life. Sickening of a mortal disorder, the natural yearnings of fatherly affection struggled hard with prejudice and habit, and prevailed. Lord Mortlake wrote with a feeble hand to announce to the Lady-Superior that he desired to see his daughter, should his malady increase, and begged that she would hold herself in readiness to start for England at short notice, and that an escort might be found for her to travel with. The Superior was puzzled, and asked her confessor and her physician for advice. The confessor shrugged up his shoulders. Perfidious Albion was only a geographical expression to him; but he had no great fancy for crossing the sea personally, and for carrying his own shovel-hat, and *soutane*, and little blue collar

among irreverent islanders, to convoy a heretic young lady. The doctor could not be spared. He suggested Mr. Royston, *père*, as a proper protector on the journey for his young compatriot; and the Superior was obliged to consent. Old Brand Royston being appealed to, expressed his willingness to take charge of Lady Flavia on the journey to Harbledown. His outlawry had never been reversed, but his creditors were dead, or had lost sight of him. He had no fears of arrest, and was willing to go, on the understanding that all expenses were to be defrayed, as was reasonable, by Lord Mortlake.

Another letter came, not from the earl, but from his medical adviser. It was hastily penned, and very short, but it urged on Lady Flavia the necessity of hurrying to Harbledown, if she would see her father alive. This letter reached the convent late in the day; and it was arranged that Lady

Flavia should sleep for one night at the château, past the gates of which the diligence clattered and rumbled daily on its way to the nearest railway-station; and that early on the following morning she should, under Mr. Royston's care, set off for Paris, and thence to England. Late on a Wednesday evening, Lady Flavia Clare and the trunks that contained her wardrobe were duly conveyed to the Château des Roches. This was the first stage of a journey which ended in the arrival of the young girl with her surly protector at Harbledown, six hours after the Earl of Mortlake had breathed his last.

CHAPTER V.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

THE funeral of Francis, Earl of Mortlake, had taken place after the usual decorous delay of nearly two weeks from the time when the weary eyes of the master of so much of this world's goods had closed in their last slumber. The will had been read. It was short and simple. Beyond a few legacies and pensions to old servants and hangers-on of the family, its provisions were very few. It gave to "my dear and only child Flavia, whom I beg sometimes to think kindly of me," all that Lord Mortlake had it in his power to give. Harbledown with the Devonshire and Somersetshire

property, followed the title as of right, and the new earl was absolute master of these. But Melshot Friars and Cupley Lees, with messuages and tenements, farms, free-warren and manor rights, three advowsons, a colliery, and many fair acres of fat Leicestershire pasture and sound Sussex arable, were given to Lady Flavia Clare. So were sixty-three thousand pounds of funded property, the savings of those sad but not useless years during which the Timon of Harbledown had shut his doors against his equals. The banished and neglected child was a great heiress now.

Lady Flavia was under age, and it was necessary that her large possessions should be vested, for the time being, in the hands of trustees. These trustees were Sir Wilbraham Alleyne, almost the only one of Lord Mortlake's early friends with whom he had kept up some intercourse, and a well-known London banker, Mr. Cottrell. These

gentlemen were to pay to Lady Flavia a large annual sum by way of an allowance, with authority to add to its amount as they saw fit; and the whole property was to be at her disposal on her coming of age or marrying, on condition of her guardian's approval, should she marry while still in the period of legal infancy. But the strangest part of the will had reference to that very guardian. Power was given to Lady Flavia to select whatever person she might please to fill this important office, on condition, however, that her choice should be ratified by "my kinsman and successor John, Lord Hythe, whom I earnestly entreat to be a better friend to my poor motherless girl than I have proved myself a father." But within all reasonable limits, Lady Flavia's selection of a personal guardian and place of residence was to be left to her own unbiassed decision.

So said the will; and though the experi-

enced London solicitor who had drawn it, and who attended with it at the business meeting which followed the funeral, had some doubts as to whether the latter provision would "stand," were the Lord Chancellor to be moved upon the subject, it was soon made quite clear that the new earl had not the slightest intention of contesting the point, or of in any way deviating from the spirit of his predecessor's written prayer.

The object of so much tardy solicitude, looking prettier and sligher than ever in her deep mourning garb, sat alone in her room, when there was a quick, low tap at the door, and her maid entered. She had a maid by this time, thanks to Mrs. Benson's sense of what was fitting, for her own taste and habits had not caused her to feel the want of such a functionary as strongly as the housekeeper did on her account. However, the new maid came in with rather a scared look.

"Mr. Royston sent me, my lady to say he is waiting to see your ladyship. He says there must be some mistake, for Lady Mortlake told him you were coming down to speak to him an hour ago."

Lady Flavia looked up from her book. "How absurd! I forgot all about him. Where is Mr. Royston?"

The abigail made answer that the gentleman was in the library, that a carriage was waiting at the door to take him away to the Chartley Railway Station, and that he seemed very impatient. "He says he has lost one train already," added the maid in conclusion, in a tone of mingled pertness and alarm, for there was something in Brand's thundering voice and fierce eye, when he was incensed, that few servants could encounter without flinching; and Simmons, London-bred as she was, had quaked at the prospect of a second meeting with one whom she afterwards described in

the still-room as an arbitrary person and black slave-driver. However, Simmons was spared this ordeal, for her young mistress went quietly down to the library, where Brand Royston was pacing to and fro with long strides, evidently in the worst possible temper. The library was a fine, large room, with its towering rows of well-stored book-shelves; and many a man in the ex-squire's case could have whiled away an hour or so agreeably enough among the treasures it contained. But Mr. Royston's reading was limited to the occasional study of the Racing Calendar and Stud Book, and to the sporting newspapers; and he had passed the last sixty minutes or so in frequent comparisons of his watch with the clock on the chimney-piece, and in angry glances through the great windows at the gravelled drive, where one of the earl's carriages stood ready to carry him off to Chartley, the nearest point on the railway.

A milder man than he might have been provoked at the delay.

Mr. Royston wheeled round as he heard the sound of the opening door, and his brow was dark, and his voice harsh, as he said :

“ Here have I been left to cool my heels this hour and a quarter, by Jove, and you care no more than—— Now you *are* come, my Lady Flavia, we'd better come to some understanding at once, you and I.”

Nothing, not even age and past kindness, could warrant the assumption of such a tone as this, and indeed Mr. Royston's voice was nearly as gruff, and his demeanour as overbearing, as when he terrified the maid, a few minutes before. But there was no trace of terror or annoyance in Lady Flavia's clear blue eyes as she approached the angry giant.

“ So very sorry to have kept you waiting, of course,” she said, in a tone that seemed but half-serious ; “ you must forgive me,

dear sir. Mine is not a common position, and I have so much to occupy my thoughts just now ;” and she sighed, while the long, dark lashes, fell like a veil over her candid blue eyes, and rested almost on her soft cheek.

“ You don’t expect me to believe in your grief and sorrow, I suppose ? By the Lord Harry, that won’t go down with *me*,” said Royston, coarsely.

The dark eyelashes rose abruptly, and for a single instant the blue eyes flashed with a cold, angry sparkle, like the glitter of a half-unsheathed sword. But there was nothing but childlike innocence in those pure eyes as they opened wide on the rough squire before them, while their owner shook her jetty curls back with a half-playful gesture, and made answer :

“ Grief ! You see, Mr. Royston, my dear father and I were almost strangers to one another. I was taken from him so early—

at six years old, you know—or eight, I forget which—otherwise my sorrow would have been deeper, naturally.”

And as the last words were spoken, this strange speech was wound up by a little peal of silvery laughter—very low, but very clear; not a mirthful laugh, or one that suggested mirthful thoughts to the listeners, and yet there was an evident enjoyment in its fairy chime. Brand Royston’s bull-eyes opened in a dull but wrathful stare, of no counterfeit astonishment. He looked sullenly down at the lovely little face that looked up at him, and by some instinct that he could not account for, he recoiled a step, and the blood rushed from his flushed face to his quick-beating heart.

“I don’t see your little game, my lady,” he muttered between his clenched teeth, but so low that it seemed impossible that Lady Flavia could catch the sound. She

was the first to resume the conversation.

“Must you really leave us to-day, Mr. Royston? Do you know I feel half as if I were deserted here, half inclined to beg you to take me back to the tiresome old convent, and Sœur Nanon, and Sœur Christine, and Madame Nenville, with her eternal ‘de la sagesse, mesdemoiselles.’ After all, I am a stranger here, and——”

Brand Royston broke in here with a half-smothered oath and a mighty stroke of one of his heavy fists in the palm of the other muscular hand. “Let us talk sense, will you, madam?” said he, involuntarily raising his voice. “You seem to wish to throw your old friends overboard altogether, but, by George, it won’t do.”

The squire had a terrible voice—one of those to which the nerves of the ear are forced to quiver and vibrate; and few persons were stout-hearted enough to listen

to its menacing accents unmoved. But there was not a shadow of fear in the girlish face that looked up at him, while the fresh young voice said in rather a graver tone than before :

“Mr. Royston, you forget yourself. I must beg you not to speak to me again in such a manner ; and yet”—and here a pretty smile of forgiveness beamed out over the fair little face—“we are such good friends, and I have so many pleasant recollections of your hospitality at the dear old château treasured in my memory, that I wish us to continue friends always. Don’t be vexed with me.”

And she put out her little white hand with a timid little gesture of reconciliation that would have bewitched any man who was not a brute. Brand Royston must surely have been a brute, for he made no sign of taking the playfully-offered hand ; on the contrary, his face grew nearly black

with suppressed passion, and he took three or four hasty strides up and down the room before he could calm himself sufficiently to resume the conversation. At last he planted himself full in front of Lady Flavia, and said, in a voice that he struggled to keep down to a low pitch: "I sent for you to speak on business. You know that that will give you power to choose your own guardian. What do you mean to do?"

Lady Flavia looked fixedly at him, but gave him no answer. Almost choking with rage, the squire forced himself to frame the query more politely: "Will you, Lady Flavia, oblige me by informing me of your intention with respect to the selection of your guardian? Has my lord spoken to you on the subject yet?"

"He has," answered the girl, and her colour mounted a very little to her lovely face as she spoke, and her eyes became more brilliant as their glance, with an inex-

plicable, almost a mocking look, watched every movement of the squire.

"Have you chosen me?" blurted out Royston savagely.

"I have chosen Lord Mortlake himself. The earl and countess came to me early to-day, and most kindly offered me a home with them at Harbledown. They remarked, what was very true, that I could not live alone—a little lonely creature such as I am—in either of my own two houses; and the earl very good-naturedly said, he could not help looking on me as the rightful mistress of this house—my poor papa's, you know——"

But here Brand Royston, with flashing eyes, strode forward, and rudely grasped Lady Flavia's delicate wrist between his iron fingers.

"Have you dared to do this?" he asked in a deep tone, like the distant roar of a lion; "have you dared—— But you shall

unsay the words; you shall, I say. You shall go to Lord Mortlake, and——”

His voice had been waxing louder and louder, in spite of himself and all his efforts to be prudent, and now its threatening sounds seemed actually to bruise the delicate ear, as the gripe of his crushing fingers was bruising the delicate flesh of the listener. But there was no shrinking in her attitude; and she had the courage to smile as she interrupted his furious speech with: “I am afraid I must indeed go to Lord Mortlake, if you will not be so very kind as to release me. There are servants in the hall outside. Perhaps I had better send word to the earl that I must really ask him to be present at this very odd interview, unless—— Thank you! But how you have hurt my wrist. There will be a great black bruise; and I shall have to tell all sorts of fibs, Mr. Royston, to keep your eccentric behaviour from the world at

large ;” and Lady Flavia looked piteously down at the hand which Royston had let drop, and on the tender flesh of which the livid marks of his rough clutch were already perceptible. Then she laughed, with a careless toss of her little head, and shook back her curls as she added : “ You put me in mind of the savage baron—what was his name ?—something beginning with L : oh, Lindesay, Lindesay of the Byres, who was so cruel as to squeeze Queen Mary’s arm with his iron gauntlet, to make her sign some silly paper or other. But Mary was frightened, and she signed it ; I would not have done so, Mr. Royston—never, never, never !”

The great heat-drops, wrung forth by fierce inward emotion, were beginning to stand thickly on Royston’s brow. He dashed them away with the back of his heavy hand, and twice he tried to speak, but his voice died away without the utter-

ance of an articulate sound. When he spoke at last, it was in a hoarse accent, like that of one half-strangled, that he said: "Remember!" and shook his lifted forefinger with a strange gesture of menace, that seemed rather suggested by recollections of the past, and bodings of future evil, than to imply a common-place threat. The squire's flushed face was pale enough now, and his breath came short and painfully. Whatever his last speech might imply, it was obvious that Lady Flavia understood it perfectly, for again the cold angry glitter, as of steel suddenly bared, shone for an instant in her blue eyes.

"Remember!" she answered, in a low sibilant tone, more like the hiss of a snake than anything that could have been expected from those rosy young lips—"remember! As if it was likely that I should ever forget!" And then followed a burst of that silvery laughter that seemed pecu-

liar to this fairy-like little creature—tiny elfin merriment, that somehow made the hearers sad without their knowing why. This rare little peal of laughter seemed to strike Brand Royston like a blow. He gasped as if for breath; and there was something very like terror in his face as he walked with unsteady steps to the window, threw it open, and leaned out, letting the fresh air blow freely on his heated forehead. A long pause succeeded. Mr. Royston's face was averted; but Lady Flavia had dropped into a chair, as if fatigued, and her slender fingers were trifling with the malachite and mother-of-pearl paper-knives and other toys on the table beside her, while her expression was that of a well-bred hostess who waits till a tiresome visitor shall relieve her of his presence. At last the squire turned round, and advanced towards her. A great change had come over him. He looked dogged and ferocious still; but the

audacity of his bearing had been replaced by an awkward sort of timidity. His voice was studiously subdued, too, as he said : “ I beg your pardon. I am rather rough and hasty ; and—and I am not used to be thwarted, as you know. Don’t let us quarrel.”

“ Now you are my good kind Mr. Royston again !” said the girl with a bright smile of forgiveness. “ My pardon is given as soon as asked. Let us part good friends, as we were in old days, when you and your kind family were so indulgent to the poor little lonely school-girl ; and come again and see us at Christmas, and bring dear Mrs. Royston. I’ll take care Lady Mortlake shall invite you.”

Brand Royston’s face would have been a study for Fuseli. His colour went and came in quick gushes, so that his face was red and purple, and almost black, as the dark blood rushed surging into it, and then

ghastly white, as fear seemed to conquer rage. He had gnawed his lip till it bled. His mighty right hand was alternately clenched and unclenched, and his staring eyes were bloodshot; but with all this formidable show of passion, the fiercer for its being kept down, there mingled a stronger current of fear—the sort of fear that a tiger might feel for a little gilded snake of deadliest venom, on whose coils the lord of the jungle was afraid to set his foot. The squire felt himself cowed by the presence of a harder nature than his own.

Very quietly, almost mechanically, as a dull pupil repeats a lesson got by rote, did he utter the words: “I am going now, Lady Flavia. If you have any last words——”

He paused, choking, and she filled up the gap, speaking with graceful ease: “Only my love to the dear ones at the château, and my respectful compliments to

the Superior, should you see Dr. Perinet soon. I mean to send the good doctor something pretty from London as a surprise. Do you think a gold snuff-box would—— But I see you are impatient. Have you taken leave of my cousins yet, the earl and countess?"

"To be sure! I wished them good-bye more than an hour ago," said Brand, breaking into something of his old tone; "but that is not to the purpose. Cannot you be open and above-board, my lady?"

Again that musical little laugh that seemed to freeze Mr. Royston's blood, while Lady Flavia archly smiled in his face as she rejoined: "Now, what does that mean? I dare say you will think me very stupid for not understanding those nautical metaphors, but it can't be helped. *Must* you go, Mr. Royston? Ah! there is one of the footmen coming in with some tiresome message from the coachman about the train,

or the horses, or my lord's orders, or something.—Yes, I thought so"—as the servant entered and civilly mentioned the fact, that there was hardly time to reach Chartley before the passage of the 4.45 express. "I must come and see you off, dear sir. My love to all at home. Remember me most kindly to dearest Mrs. Royston and dearest Adela; and give my best wishes to Captain Basil, and—— I do so hope I shall not have made you miss the train."

And as the carriage drove rapidly off, bearing away Mr. Royston, cowed, miserable, and inwardly chafing, the last sight he saw was that graceful little figure, in deep mourning, standing on the stately flight of steps, and the last sound he heard was that ringing little silver laugh, that seemed to have power to tame his rugged nature, as the snake-charmer tames the serpent. What was the secret, vaguely shadowed forth, of any link between these

two beings, so incongruous, so mutually repellent, yet whose conduct, but for the ineffaceable memories of the past, to which neither cared to refer, would have been inexplicable? Time alone could solve that riddle. At any rate, such was the manner in which Brand Royston, sometime of Royston hall, took his leave of Harbledown and its occupants; and thus did Lady Flavia Clare become a permanent inmate of her kinsman's home.

CHAPTER VI.

LORD HYPHE.

THE new Earl and Countess of Mortlake had four daughters, but only one son, now Lord Hythe, but who had for some years been known in the House of Commons as the Honourable Augustus Clare, M.P. for Starvington, a bleak little Wiltshire borough that had escaped reform. It might have done worse, however, than return Mr. Clare, who was a steady working-member, if not a brilliant politician. Lord Hythe was about thirty years old, a comely, manly Englishman, sensible, honest, and earnest, a capital man on committees, a safe vote, not to be led

away by pique or crotchet, and exactly the sort of speaker who is held worth his weight in gold at agricultural meetings and mechanics' institutes. He had but lately arrived at Harbledown, much to the delight of his mother and sisters, whose idol he was; and indeed, if praise and deference in the family circle could have spoiled Lord Hythe's nature, spoiled it would have been in no slight degree. But all the flattery in the world could not have made a coxcomb of the member for Starvington, and he shot partridges, read bluebooks, and returned the visits of the county magnates with equal calmness. It was not until September that he reached Harbledown.

Of Lord Mortlake's four daughters, two were still in the schoolroom, but two were grown up, and very well grown too. They had been left in London, under the care of a cousin, a certain Mrs. Archibald

Clare, when their parents were somewhat suddenly called down to the west to attend their dying kinsman ; and the season being over, they had gladly come down early in August. Lady Caroline and Lady Julia, the two eldest, were a brace of large young women, tall, light-haired, and possessed of pink healthy faces and equable tempers. They had been "out" for two and three seasons respectively, and were spinsters still ; but they felt no bitterness or mortification at seeing so many of their contemporaries married before them. That their turn would come, they never doubted, and they were in no hurry for the orange blossoms and Honiton lace, sure as they were that their aristocratic names would sooner or later be inscribed in the vestry-books of St. George's, Hanover-square. But almost all their sex, from the child, vain of her white sash and well-starched frock, to the grandmother bending in her elbow-chair,

have a turn for match-making, and so it was in this case.

Lady Caroline and Lady Julia often disputed which was the first to suggest how delightful it would be if darling Flavia and Hythe, as they were beginning to call their brother, could be brought to like each other. But to whichever of the sisters the bright original idea was due, it was hailed with acclamation, and Lady Mortlake smiled upon it with maternal approbation. Why not? It would be an excellent match, looking at it merely from a worldly point of view. Such a marriage would reunite the former possessions of the Clare family; and when Hythe should succeed as ninth earl to the pearl-pointed coronet, he would be a richer man, and thus more worthy of marquises, Irish viceroyalty, and presidencies of the council, than any of his predecessors. Then Hythe was such a dear fellow, so clever, good, wise, prudent, so

excellent a pilot and protector for a charming little giddy thing, such as Flavia, in the perilous voyage of life; and Flavia was such a sweet creature, that if ever marriages are really made in heaven, surely, so the sisters thought, this would be one of them. It is very probable that had Lady Flavia been less splendidly dowered than she was, Lady Caroline and Lady Julia might have been less eager to hail her as their sister-in-law. But they were not so much influenced by mercenary motives as might be supposed. They had taken a great fancy to the lovely little orphaned cousin whom they had found, looking so pretty and delicate in her deep mourning, at Harbledown. They knew enough of her story to be prepared from the first to sympathise with, and be kind to, this, poor lonely little maid, who had been the innocent scapegoat for the sins of others. But they were surprised at find-

ing how very graceful, how sprightly and spirited, was the young kinswoman whom they had set down, on first hearing of her, as a raw school-girl fresh from backboards and music-lessons. But this notion was a thoroughly mistaken one. Lady Flavia, hospitably welcomed and made much of, had been like a flower expanding its delicate petals to the genial generous sunshine. Her early silence and reserve had thawed as thin ice melts at the warm breath of spring. It would not have been natural that she, who had but an indistinct recollection of her father, should have been long overcome by grief at his loss ; and her gentle sorrow, which seemed more like the overflow of a true and tender heart, than the deep-seated regret that in such a case was hardly possible, only served to lend her an additional charm. Gradually the bright smile on her face became more frequent, her youthful spirits rose ; and by

the first week in October, the convent-bred girl was the pet and spoiled darling of the household.

Lord Hythe smiled incredulously when first, on his arrival at Harbledown, his sisters combined to fill his ears with the praises of their new friend. He knew well enough that young-lady friendships are apt to grow like the gourd of the prophet, and to wither, sometimes, as rapidly, and had no very high expectations with regard to this new relative. He came down to dinner, anticipating that the family phoenix would prove either a bread-and-butter miss of the awkward red-knuckled British type, or a chattering, self-conscious damsel of the French pattern. But the sight of so much loveliness—for Lady Flavia looked far prettier than when we first saw her, pale and weary, on the threshold of her unfamiliar home—surprised him, and the girl's manner perplexed him excessively. He was not a

lady's man, was more at home in a committee-room than in an opera-box, but he was no fool, and had some knowledge of women's ways. That knowledge was at fault now. There was something about Lady Flavia Clare that he could not fathom.

"I've seen every variety of prude, flirt, and coquette, stupid good women, clever good women, and those who were good without being clever or stupid, but never any one in the least like *her*," said Lord Hythe to himself as he strolled beside the trout-stream that came splashing and bubbling down from the high purple moors whose bold chain overhangs Harbledown Park. "I can't make her out. She has more sense in her little finger, I'm certain, than Carry and Julia put together, and yet she lets them treat her like a child or a plaything. She has a brilliant fancy, and never talks platitudes, yet she is not a bit

of a blue. I never can tell whether she is serious or joking, with all that playfulness of hers, and that laugh—it's a very musical laugh—but I think I had rather my wife should be less of an enigma. Eh, Leo, my boy?" And Lord Hythe stooped and patted the head of his great dog, the usual companion of his walks. A very fine and a very faithful dog was Leo, and his master insisted on bringing him constantly into the family circle, rather to the distress of the countess, who was constitutionally timid, and never could quite reconcile herself to the animal's presence. Indeed, none of Lord Hythe's near relations had ever felt quite comfortable when in company with the big tawny brute, yellow as a lion, and nearly large enough for one, six-and-thirty inches at the shoulder, and possessing the black muzzle, the heavy tail, strong paws, deep chest, and solemn dignity of the pure old Pyrenean breed of wolf-dogs. A

patrician of the canine race was Leo, very grave and majestic, never seeking a quarrel with man or beast, and rarely uttering that mighty bark, at the sound of which others of his species slunk off trembling to their kennels. But for all that, and although Leo treated his master's friends with distinguished politeness, there was something in the expression of the dog's dark eyes, deep-set, and glowing like carbuncles, that said, *Noli me tangere*, as plainly as a human tongue could have done, and no one ever patted the noble brute otherwise than respectfully, and in a half-apologetic manner.

But here, wonder of wonders, came out another trait in Lady Flavia's apparently incongruous character: she alone of the household refused to be afraid of Leo. In spite of all well-meant warnings, in spite of suppressed feminine screams from the young ladies, she would have her way. When Leo lay stretched on the hearth-rug,

lazily blinking at the cold grate, and perhaps dreaming of winter and its bright fires, Lady Flavia would seat herself on a low stool beside the dog, twine her arms round his neck, and caress the huge brute as fearlessly and familiarly as if he had been the meekest of lap-dogs. A pretty sight it was, as Lord Hythe often owned to himself, that of this slight delicate fairy with her slender arms wound round Leo's brawny neck, and her silken curls falling in ebon masses over the great hound's shaggy yellow coat. But there was one feature in the case that could not but strike the young man, a keener observer than his mother and sisters. If Lady Flavia were not afraid of Leo, which was obvious, it was almost equally plain that Leo was afraid of Lady Flavia. It seemed absurd, but it was true. To his master's practised eye, the mighty dog never failed to show signs of fear, and of a sort of scared subjection,

while those white little hands were tenderly stroking his massive head, and those blue girlish eyes were bent on his. Then, as the dog cowered down submissively, the dead earl's daughter would look up with her bright glance and her ringing elfin laugh.

"Leo and I are very good friends, and understand each other quite well," she would say in that playful tone which always puzzled Lord Hythe as to whether some deeper meaning did not lurk beneath the words than they seemed to convey. "You should give him to me, and then we could walk about the moors together, like Una and the Lion, you know. Give a paw, Leo. Good dog!"

Leo never condescended to give his broad forepaw to any one but his master, Lady Flavia excepted; but there was a spell in her voice and look that the creature obeyed at once.

"Is she a sorceress, then, and has she

bewitched you, old fellow?" asked Lord Hythe as he walked along, looking down at his dog as it gravely paced beside him. "Or is she really the Fairy Queen she looks? Yes, it would be a very good match, as my mother says; and the girl is sweetly pretty, and she has Cupley Lees and Melshot Friars stitched to her apron; but—but I had rather think twice about it, though I am sure I could give no reason for saying so."

CHAPTER VII.

FINDING THE PORTRAIT.

THE dusk of an October evening was closing around Harbledown, and the last glow of the sunlight had faded slowly from the windows of the western wing. In that wing were the pretty pink rooms, Lady Flavia's apartments, and there, before a quaint old cabinet, stood Lady Flavia herself, with a small box in her hand. The cabinet was a specimen of costly old French upholstery, sadly overloaded with ornament, no doubt, but holding its place in virtue of the richness of the materials. Buhl and ivory, ebony and ormolu, incrustated its front, and while the legs were inlaid with

tortoise-shell and mother-of-pearl, the doors were of gilt filigree-work, with panels of enamel, the ground of which was *bleu du roi* or tender rose Dubarri; whilst the tiniest of flowers and nymphs, and cupids and shepherds, had been painted thereon by the daintiest of crayons. Before this cabinet stood the girl-mistress of that pretty suite of rooms, somewhat impatiently trying, with the aid of a bunch of small keys, to open those gorgeous little doors, the gilding of which was but little tarnished by time. At last the right key was inserted, and the long-disused hinges opened creakingly, while a faint musky scent, as if clinging to perfumed love-letters written by the long dead, came from the compartments within.

There is something melancholy in the aspect of these receptacles for old-world trifles, these mausoleums, as it were, of hopes, and wishes, and follies, belonging to those who have perished long ago. But

Lady Flavia Clare cast no glances of sentimental regret at the relics with which the interior of the cabinet was strewed. There were yellow old letters there, the dim writing of which had once very likely been kissed by rosy lips, and read a score of times over by bright eyes—eyes and lips that were dust and ashes now. There was a broken fan; there was the hilt of a shattered sword; there was the miniature of a young man, wearing the cross of St. Louis over the white uniform of the Bourbons; and there were some loose pearls, and a broken bracelet, and a faded breast-knot of ribbon, and a dried flower or two, ready to crumble at a touch. No doubt, each and all of these had a history attached to them, but the tongues that could have told it were silent for ever. Lady Flavia wasted no sympathy on these; she pushed back in a confused heap the letters in their eighteenth-century writing, and the breast-knot of

faded blue that had once been pinned to the bosom of some fair girl of the days of hoops and powder, and the sword-hilt and the bracelet; and she set-down in the space she had cleared the small box she had held in her hand, a plain little coffer of walnut-wood, shaped like a medicine chest.

“Dangerous! to keep such matters in trunks or wardrobes,” she murmured, as she laid it down. “This will just be the place to lock my treasure safely away from prying eyes. I don’t think any Fatima among the housemaids will think of exploring this queer old piece of furniture, even if the lock were easier to pick. And as she spoke, she held up the twisted little key, with its minute but numerous wards, and examined it carefully. Then she seemed about to close the doors, but some fascination impelled her to gaze on the little walnut-wood box, to all appearance as plain and unattractive as box could be. “Why keep it at all?” she said hesitatingly.

"It is a mute witness that might rise against me one day. And yet—and yet I *must* keep it. I am safe. I think I am safe. But Life and Death are so very near together, and Fate ravel's the best of our plans, and I would at least be free to choose at the last. And there is freedom here"—she laid her hand almost caressingly on the box—"a refuge in case of need. But I shall never want it." She was then about in good earnest to close the cabinet, but she discovered that the box prevented the doors from shutting, and when she pushed it back, some hard substance intervened between the coffer and the wall of the cabinet. "More of this worn-out lumber of Louis XV.'s day!" she said, with a petulant stamp of her little foot; and thrusting in her hand, drew out an oval morocco-case, evidently of more modern construction than the rest of the contents of the tiny museum. She pressed the spring, and the case flew open, revealing

a miniature delicately painted on ivory. She carried it to the window, and, by the fading light saw that it was the portrait of a beautiful child, a little girl of perhaps six or seven years of age, with flowing dark curls and a sweet face. It was very carefully, if not very spiritually executed. The artist had earned his fifty guineas by the minute prettiness with which he had laboured to reproduce the fresh young cheek with its rose-leaf bloom, the pure brow shaded by rippling ringlets, the bright lips parting in a happy smile. Around the painted ivory was a broad rim of seed-pearls in a setting of dead gold, a frame-work of some value, though looking worth more than its actual cost, very likely ; and on the border of dead gold were scratched the words "Lady Flavia Clare."

For one instant, the colour faded out of Lady Flavia's cheek as she traced those words ; then it came back in all its delicate


beauty, and the young heiress tossed her head with a saucy little laugh, as she said : "Myself! and very like me, even now, after all these years." And the heiress glanced at the nearest mirror, and then again at the miniature, with a sort of infantine pride. The likeness, indeed was wonderful, and the youthful candour of expression was common to both countenances. Suddenly a frown came over the girl's fair forehead, and turning away, she hastily struck a light, and held a taper close to the miniature. One glance was enough. Lady Flavia's beauty grew cold and hard, and her face assumed the same strange look that it wore on that first night when she had found herself alone under the roof of Harbledown. "It is well I was the one to find it," she said, with a low laugh, in which there was little mirthfulness ; "I had forgotten those dark eyes. They seem to reproach me—that matters little. The danger is from others.

This must not fall into wrong hands." And then this singular girl, after one long and steady look at the miniature, closed the case with a sharp snap, and laid it on the table beside her, and lifting her head defiantly, looked out upon the shadowy gardens and the dark woods beyond, where the rooks were cawing querulously among the swaying pine-trees. For a minute or two she stood thus, with compressed lips and clenched hands, gazing at the gathering mists that began to curl up, blue and thin, above the copse and the meadows, while the park was already in deep shadow. The fogs and darkness were fast closing in, and yet the dinner hour was far off—much might be done before the dressing-bell should ring, and Simmons arrive upon the scene. And Lady Flavia had already determined upon her course of action.

Hastily wrapping a dark shawl around her, she extinguished the taper, and left the

room, carrying the miniature concealed beneath the folds of her lace-bordered handkerchief. Swift and silent she glided, wraith-like, down the broad staircase, flitted across the hall, darted into a side-passage, and gained a door that was but little used, but which led to the garden. In a moment more she was outside, among the deserted walks and leafy shrubs, and so far her wish had been gratified. She had left the house, and unseen. There was a wicket that opened on a neglected corner of the park, where the tall fern and brambles grew thickly, and towards this point of egress from the gardens Lady Flavia rapidly made her way, keeping heedfully in the shadow of the masses of lilac and rhododendron that skirted the lawn.

It was but a step from the wicket-gate, across the angle of the park, to the belt of black fir plantation that crowned the low hill beyond ; but the wood looked funereal



and gloomy enough, it might have been thought, to repel one so delicately nurtured as the heiress of Cupley Lees and Melshot Friars from intruding into its darkling depths; especially on a foggy October evening, when the mists were rising fast, and when the low sigh of the wind sounded doubly mournful among those black, plummy trees. But Lady Flavia pressed steadily on, looking for the narrow footpath that she knew intersected the plantation thereabouts. She was one of those persons who possess a sort of topographical instinct that never deceives them. Once, and once only, had she entered the wood that fringed the lower part of the park, and that was when the earl had insisted on taking his wife and daughters a mile or so out of their way, that they might see the pheasantries, and duly admire the hopeful condition of the young birds that were completing their physical education there on boiled buck-

wheat and chopped eggs. The paths through the wood were intricate, and it is probable that Lord Mortlake would not have known which to select, unaided by his pocket-map of the estate; but Lady Flavia advanced unhesitatingly, until she was deep in the centre of the labyrinth of firs, and had arrived at a spot where, amidst thick brushwood, stood a gaunt old giant of a sycamore, hollowed by decay, and seared by lightning, but yearly putting forth a few fresh leaves and yellow blossoms, in token of vitality. Between the forks of the lowest bough, a sear bough, in which the sap had not run for years, some keeper had nailed a dead hawk, and there the dried bird hung, with expanded wings and fleshless bones, like a murderer bleaching on a gibbet. At the foot of the tree the moss grew in thick tufts, and there the violets were plentiful in the early spring-time, while all around

grew stunted hazels and ash-trees, mixed up with unsightly sucker-fringed stumps of elms and oaks felled long ago. Here Lady Flavia stopped, glancing to left and right, and listening intently for the slightest sound. It was with a sigh of relief that she approached the tree, and thrust her ungloved hand and slender arm deep down into the hollow trunk; as she did so, her fingers grasped something cold and slippery, that stirred beneath her touch, and then followed an angry hiss, as a snake, disturbed, probably, in his winter-quarters, showed his flat head and lithe body through an aperture lower down the bole of the decayed sycamore.

That Lady Flavia should hastily withdraw her hand, was not surprising, but she uttered no cry, and made no motion to flee from the spot, calmly looking down at the snake. Then her lip curled as she recognised, by its diamond-patterned coat, in

black and white streaks, that the creature was harmless. She stood still, watching the graceful undulating movements with which the reptile glided away through the rank grass and dead leaves ; then she laughed—one of those strange little laughs that any listener, had a listener been there, would have found out of tune with the voice of his own heart. “It might have been an adder,” she said, in the lowest tone of her fresh young voice, but with a strange bitterness of expression. “Would it have stung me, I wonder, for intruding on its nest? No. I bear a charmed life. And now to hide away this morsel of painted ivory.” And as she said these words she unflinchingly thrust her arm back into the hollow tree trunk, and deposited the miniature at the bottom of the dark recess, covering it up with chips of bark and scraps of rotten wood, that lay plentifully within. Then she turned away, and without one

further glance at the place where she had concealed the portrait, she re-entered the narrow path through the fir-wood, treading swiftly and silently, and avoiding, by a kind of instinct, the knotted and spreading roots that protruded from the ground like a network to ensnare unwary feet. By this time the fog and the gathering night had made it very dark, and beneath the blackness of the boughs the keenest eye might have been at fault. But Lady Flavia pursued her way without doubt or fear, until, as she drew near to the edge of the wood, the sound of voices speaking in stealthy accents fell upon her ear, and she stopped, mute and motionless, as if turned into stone.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STROKE OF BUSINESS.

"EIGHT pun ten for ninety brace. You dare offer a man that, dare ye? Ninety brace for eight pounds ten shillings! Curse you, what do you mean by that?" was the fierce question, put in what is perhaps the the most terrible of all tones, that of a deep, strong voice, whose owner struggles hard to bridle the fury that rages in his heart.

"Now, my tear, my tear," thus ran the answer, coaxingly uttered in thick, oily accents; "my good friend, Benjamin, don't you be in a passion. Conshider ——"

"Old Nick take you and your considerations!" savagely interrupted the first

speaker, bringing something weighty down with a heavy thud upon the soft earth of the path, as if to emphasise his words. "I'm not such a muff as you suppose, nor such a gull neither, Master Levi. I sold you ninety brace of pheasants ——"

"Ninety brace of my lord's pheasantsh, just so!" said he of the oily voice, interrupting in his turn. A growl like that of a wild beast, and certain indications that his companion was preparing to supplement words with blows, then caused the Jew, for such he evidently was, to recoil a pace or two, and to say, with some alarm in his tone: "No violence, my very tear friend, or we're all ruined together. The cart's in the lane by the park wall, within sound of a whistle, and the two ladsh are in the cart. You'd best restrain yourself."

While the two had been standing among the thick fir-trees, the forms of both had been invisible; but now, as the Jew emerged

into a little patch of cleared ground where the young trees were mere seedlings of a few months' growth, his plump, little figure, fleshy face, and twinkling black eyes, could be seen with tolerable distinctness. He wore a sailor's peacoat, of rough blue cloth, a greasy hat, and a heavy silver watch-chain serpentining over his frowsy waistcoat and cravat of frayed satin. Altogether, he was just such a figure as Houndsditch or the Minories could furnish in kaleidoscopic profusion, and he formed the strongest possible contrast to the tall Anglo-Saxon with whom he was disputing. The latter, a gaunt giant of a man, clad in velveteen and leather, with a face tanned brown by sun and storm, a shaggy head, a quick restless blue eye that dwelt on the ground by preference, a gun and a shot-belt, could have been only a backwoodsman or a game-keeper. The expression of his face, as he moved a step forward from the shadow of

the trees, boded nothing pleasant; and as he, for the second time, brought the butt-end of his gun heavily down upon the soft earth, there was a sparkle in his eye that the Jew was not slow to interpret.

"Well, well, my tear," he said fawningly; "if eight poundsh ten won't satisfy you, we'll throw in a shoverein more, though, so Moses shall help me, I shall lose money by it; I shall, indeed."

"Don't try that gammon with me!" broke out the keeper, with an angry oath. "It's little better nor two shillings a brace—two shillings—and them selling for nine or ten up in London! Was it worth my while to risk my place and my character, to get fobbed off with such paltry pickings I should like to know? Suppose any one was to tell my lord of them two bucks I was fool enough to sell you last June, just before the old earl died—— Hist! didn't you hear a branch crack?" And the

man became silent, peering suspiciously about him into the darkness of the plantations. Levi had heard nothing, but he was in haste to be gone out of the reach of his savage confederate ; he therefore produced a little flannel bag, and chinked the money that it contained. A brief whispered conversation ensued between the two worthies, the Jew's voice alone being distinctly audible at times. The words, "so much rishk"—"police, my tear"—"losses"—and "sad roguesh up in London," rose at intervals above the deep, monotonous growl of the keeper, and at last the gold and silver clinked as the coins, counted out one by one into the woodman's hard palm, were transferred to safe keeping in a weasel-skin purse, and buttoned up in the pocket of the recipient.

Then followed a few hurried sentences, which ended in these words: "I dursn't kill so many. It's as much as my place is

worth. My lord's so particular about the head of hares— Hush! I heard something. You'd better be off!" And then was heard the Jew's shuffling tread as he quickly withdrew. The keeper remained stationary, with his gun cast into the hollow of his arm, and his head a little bowed, while his practised eye roved from tree to bush in eager quest of the cause of the slight rustling sound that his ear had detected. For more than a minute he stood thus, until the faint sound of the wheels of his accomplice, the Jew-middleman's cart, had died away in the miry lane, and then with a grunt of satisfaction, lifted his head, and shook back his shaggy hair. "Maybe 'twas a stoat!" he muttered.

"No, it was not a stoat," said a silvery voice at his elbow, and the keeper winced and started as if he had seen a ghost, as the slight figure of a girl—a lady by her voice and dress—glided out of the wood, and stood

before him. Just then, the moon began to whiten the tops of the black-fir trees, and a stray gleam revealed the face of what the rough forester was at first half inclined to take for a supernatural visitant. But no one who had once seen Lady Flavia was likely to forget her, and it was with infinite dismay that the keeper recognised the daughter of the late, and kinswoman of the present, earl. How much of his conversation with the serviceable Mr. Levi had she overheard? and how much of what she heard was it in young-lady nature to understand? Thus ran the man's thoughts; and for a moment a vague idea flashed upon his mind that he might deny his own identity, and pass himself off as a poacher, a safer character to assume just then than that of a faithless custodian of the Harbledown preserves. But that was hopeless. Benjamin Haynes, *alias* Big Ben, head-keeper on the estate, groaned inwardly, as he remembered how

often he had touched his napless hat to the young ladies from the Hall. He was sure that Lady Flavia knew him well. But why she was there, in that wood, alone in the dark, and without hat or bonnet, was more than his bewildered faculties could compass. He stood still and stared at her quite stupidly, like an over-driven ox.

“Your interview with your friend—what is his name?—oh, Levi, to be sure—has amused me very much, Mr. Haynes,” said Lady Flavia, with her innocent look of perfect candour. “It was quite like a scene in a play, I should think. How Lord Mortlake will laugh, I am sure, at that funny, funny bargain for the ninety—brace, I think you call them, of pheasants.” And the high-born beauty laughed in her own peculiar elfin fashion, a laugh at which the keeper shivered involuntarily, and drew back a step, gasping for breath. Rogue as he was, Big Ben was

was no craven. He had proved his courage in more than one midnight skirmish, and had been, when a younger man, one of the best players at single-stick in that countryside, and a staunch bruiser at wake and fair. But now he felt his forehead damp with a cold moisture, and his eye quailed before the clear, blue eyes of this fairy-like creature, who seemed to have risen out of the earth for the discomfiture of Benjamin Haynes. One despairing effort he made to brazen it out.

“A little matter of business, miss—my lady. My lord wanted some young birds to turn down in Tinningley Copse, and as Levi is in that line of business, I just sent for him to ——” So the man was blundering on, but Lady Flavia cut short the embryo lie.

“I understand the affair perfectly, Mr. Haynes. You need not trouble yourself to invent any ingenious romances for my bene-

fit. And I am quite sure that Lord Mortlake will agree with you in thinking two shillings a—'brace' was the word, was it not?—a sadly low price, and hardly one that repays you for the trouble of robbing your master."

These words were spoken with a piteous distinctness, not angrily, but rather with a provoking clearness of diction, such as might have suited the lips of a mocking spirit that knew no sympathy with human weakness. The keeper groaned aloud, and his head drooped despondently. "The game's up," he murmured; "All's over with Ben Haynes."

In imagination, already the wretched man saw himself dismissed and disgraced, turned out of his cottage, and converted from a trusted upper-servant into an out-cast, with the brand of dishonesty on his brow. It was a terrible downcoming. Loss of house and garden, of weekly wages, of

perquisites lawful and illicit, of money honestly made out of the rabbits that were called the keeper's property, of milk, firing, candles, presents from my lord's visitors, black-mail from the master of the fox-hounds, loss of social consideration, loss of self-esteem. A rogue does not feel half a rogue until he is found out. Big Ben, prosperous, had been on good terms with himself, but now his dulled conscience awoke and stung him.

"It's all of them infernal skittles, and the card-playing up at the beer-shop," growled the keeper, remorsefully. "I had a good place, and made plenty by it, but I lost most of my earnings by ill-luck—more fool me; but my poor missis and the children——" And he actually gave a sob of mingled rage and pain, and drew the back of his rough hand across his eyes, filled as they were by unaccustomed tears. Lady Flavia looked at him inquisitively,

and a little scornfully, like one who studies some rare psychological phenomenon, but feels no thrill of compassion for the subject of that scrutiny. But the melting mood did not long endure in the case of Mr. Benjamin Haynes. He suddenly lifted his head, and stared at his accuser. There was something in his look that resembled that of an over-driven ox still, but of an ox that was about to rush with goring horn and trampling hoof upon his tormentors. His breath came short and thick, his brows were knit, and his teeth were close set. Evidently the fellow was desperate. Evidently the idea, that to sweep away this unwelcome witness of his knavery was the only chance of safety, had presented itself forcibly to his narrow mind. He was at bay. It was dangerous to be alone with him.

Lady Flavia Clare was not slow to read the signs of peril in the man's kindling eye,

or to note the manner in which his strong fingers clutched the barrels of his gun, as if they would crush the tough iron. But she remained dauntless and calm, as one who trusted in the protection of some talisman, against which brute force availed not, and it was with perfect steadiness that she said :

“ But it would be so very, very silly—so certain to be found out ; and that is why you will not do what you are thinking of, and thereby noose a halter for your own neck, Mr. Haynes.”

The fearless words, dispassionately spoken, went straight to the man's heart, and with a smothered oath he let the gun drop on the moss at his feet, and turned his face away. Lady Flavia, after a brief pause, spoke again.

“ You may take up your gun again, Mr. Haynes, and look, if you please, on all that has happened as if it had been a dream—a great, ugly dream. I have no wish to do

you any harm. I have no present intention of saying a word to Lord Mortlake——”

The man looked round, breathing hard. “Bless you, my lady! If you’d have mercy on my wife and children, and give a poor fellow a chance, I’d serve you to my dying day, ay, that I would—I’d go through fire and water, if you bid me. I’d never touch a card again, so help——”

Thus he went on; but Lady Flavia checked him with an impatient wave of her little hand. “Don’t promise more than you will care to perform,” she said, as he turned away. “I don’t belong to the Society for the Suppression of Vice, and I have nothing to do with your taste for gambling. I may call on you to be as good as your word, some day, in doing my bidding without asking tiresome questions: or I may not. But at any rate, I shall say nothing for the present to the earl.”

She turned away, and passed with her

usual lightness of tread down the narrow path, and was soon clear of the wood, and crossing the park towards the gate of the gardens. As she reached the wicket, the dressing-bell rang.

“That may be useful one day,” said the daughter of Francis, seventh Earl of Mortlake, with one of those laughs to whose purport she alone possessed the key; “and now I must make haste up-stairs, and endure to hear Simmons express her consternation at my risk of catching cold by stopping out so late in the evening air. There is an end of the portrait, anyhow.”

And she went in; but with all the marvellous intuition into other people's motives that in her case seemed to stand in lieu of worldly experience, Lady Flavia fell into the common error of undervaluing a defeated opponent. The impulse of gratitude for the unexpected clemency that had been shewn him, was short-lived in the

keeper's breast. The impulse of self-preservation was strong and tenacious. He by no means relished the idea of holding his place and its emoluments by the uncertain tenure of a young lady's caprice, and he had no very high opinion of feminine discretion. To be sure, he had never in his life before that evening seen a woman who could stand utterly undaunted before an angry man who had cause to wish her dead, and he could not but feel some dim consciousness that one who could speak so fearlessly and so sensibly to a desperado with murder in his thoughts, might possibly have an abnormal power of keeping a secret. But would she keep it? Did she merely mean to play with his fears, like a cat with a half-dead mouse, and was the evil day but deferred? One word to the earl would be fatal, and that word might be spoken weeks or months hence. In this dilemma, a bright idea dawned on Big Ben's bemuddled mind.

“Why on earth had Lady Flavia,” he asked himself, “come into the wood at all?” He had been too much occupied in thinking of the awkward scrape he was in, to ponder on the subject before, and an enigma it was, for he was confident that it was not with any desire to play the part of an amateur detective in matters of game-preserving, that a damsel of her rank and nurture was found, bare-headed and alone, in a fir-wood, during a foggy evening in October.

“I’ll lay my life,” exclaimed Big Ben, “my lady has got some secrets of her own to hide; and if I could light on one of ’em, and so get a hold on her, I’d sleep sounder, and feel myself more like my own man again. If ’twas to meet some young chap—some one as didn’t dare to come up to the great house to do his courting openly—whew!” and the keeper ended the soliloquy by a long and expressive whistle. He was no great talker, as we have seen, and still

less had he the power of disciplined thought that only belongs to the educated; but he was not wanting in a sort of homely cunning and shrewdness, and his instincts were sharpened by fear of disgrace and beggary. To learn something connected with Lady Flavia's proceedings, something that she would not like to have divulged, and to use that knowledge for his own safeguard and possible profit, that would indeed be a glorious method of turning the tables.

"I'll win the odd trick, mayhap, my lady," grumbled Big Ben, and he lost not a moment in putting his crude project into execution. To track the high-born heiress to the trysting-place where she had probably given rendezvous to a supposed admirer, was the only plan that suggested itself to the practical mind of Mr. Haynes, and to most persons this would have appeared a hopeless undertaking. Not so to Big Ben. Woodcraft was his only lore, and his read-

ing was confined to the Book of Nature ; but to his eyes, as to those of some savage hunter of the wilderness, much that was written in that wondrous volume, and to which spectacled professors would have been purblind, was as clear as if it were printed in the biggest and blackest of capitals. He felt as confident of tracing Lady Flavia Clare, could he once come upon a footmark of hers, as any student of hieroglyphic literature could be of reading off the inscription on a newly-dug-up obelisk, by aid of the Champollion stone. Even in the surprise of being accosted when in flagrant delict of game-selling, the keeper's long habit of observation had not slumbered.

"She come out atween two trees, and one of 'em had a white blaze down its face—a cut made by the knife of that gallus young Dick, the watcher's son, I'll go bail ; anyhow, I saw her step from behind that tree," muttered the keeper, and in a couple

of strides he reached the spot indicated. Sure enough, from one of the slender fir-trees, a slip of dusky red bark had been sliced away; the white wood shewed its surface, shining like a streak of silver in the moonlight, and a few fragrant brown drops of turpentine, like tears or goutts of blood, had oozed from the wound. For about the distance of a yard beyond this tree, the moon's rays penetrated between the slim fir-boles, and by their aid Mr. Haynes could see the print of a pretty little foot quite distinctly impressed in the soft loam. There it was before his eyes, as plain to be seen as the famous footmark that scared Robinson Crusoe on his desert island; but the ground was stony in parts; and within the illuminated space on the verge of the plantation no other print was visible. The keeper rubbed his hands together with a chuckle of satisfaction. So far, so good. He had got the key of the cipher; and as he drew from his

pocket the little dark lantern and the box of matches without which he never went abroad after sundown, hope sprang strongly up in his rugged bosom. "They say the old earl left her mortal rich," said Beg Ben, his projects expanding at the first gleam of success. "If I could find out something or other she does on the sly, she might do me a deal o' good, and never miss it. Fifty—a hundred—a hundred would be a snug stocking-full, wouldn't it?" And again chuckling, the keeper lighted his lantern, adjusted the slide, and advanced with cautious steps into the wood, examining every square inch of ground as attentively as a conveyancer pores over a doubtful title-deed. There were a good many stones about; the dead fronds made a thick carpet, and the knotted roots were disseminated around in such profusion, that in some places their twisted convolutions made a rough wooden platform, over which

a light foot might pass, and leave no more trace than a bird leaves in the air. But though the progress of Mr. Haynes was very slow, it was also very sure. He was wonderfully patient as he groped his way among the close-growing fir-trees, finding here and there a clue for his future guidance. These were, for the most part, such slight indications of the passage of a human being as would have conveyed no intimation to any but an adept in silvan learning. Here, a crushed tuft of moss was slowly recovering its elasticity, after being flattened under foot; there, a dry twig has snapped under the weight that had rested on it for an instant; and a few inches distant was a small indentation in the earth, freshly made, but hardly to be recognised as the print of the heel of a dainty slipper. But though such signs were faint and few, the chain was perfect, and the keeper's keen scrutiny was never long at fault.

At last the marks led out into the path, some thirty yards higher up the wooded hill than the spot at which the ill-starred conversation with Levi had taken place. It was not hard for Mr. Haynes to divine that Lady Flavia had diverged from the path on hearing the sound of voices below, and had, during the altercation between the Jew and himself, approached them noiselessly under cover of the plantation. But to trace her back to whence she came was now a more difficult task. In many places the path was quite dry, and took no impression from the feet that trod it; in others, the moist earth was indented by hob-nailed shoes, by boots of lighter make, even by the pattens of such of the village children as chanced sometimes to pass that way on their road home from school to the upland cottages on the edge of the moors. The path was crossed by other paths, and to go wrong was easier than to go right.

But the search went steadily on. It was strange with what skill and pains the keeper made his slow way, finding in broken grass-blades, in pinches of freshly-disturbed earth, in faint dints made in the smooth, white sand deposited by tiny runlets of water that had trickled down during the last rains, a chart to guide him in his stealthy progress. Big Ben was by no means a student of the late Mr. Fenimore Cooper. He had never heard of the wondrous skill with which the red warriors of America follow up a trail, nor of the arts by which the elephant-hunters of South Africa read the "spoor" as if it were a book. But he had studied under the same schoolmistress—Nature—as the Caffre and the Delaware, and he was no dunce in his own profession. "I've tracked a mort o' vermin," was his uncomplimentary soliloquy, as he plodded, with bent head and roving eyes, up the hill; "I know the prints of a founmart from those of a stoat or a

weasel, and a fox's footmark from a dog's, and a rabbit's from a hare's, don't I? And why shouldn't I be even with you yet, my lady?" And in effect so steadily did he pursue his search, that in little more than an hour from the time that Lady Flavia left him, he stood beneath the gaunt bare boughs of the great old sycamore-tree, like a hound that has found the scent suddenly fail him. "Hang me, if I can make head or tail of it!" muttered the keeper, scratching his right ear disconsolately, after a long investigation of every portion of the clearing around the foot of the blasted tree. "There's plenty of marks of her making; none of any one else. Nobody's met her here, that I'll swear to. P'rhaps the chap didn't come, and miss got tired of waitin'; or has she been here alone for some play-actin' sort o' nonsense, or—— Hilloa! what's this?" And he sprang forward. His restless eye had detected a white speck of something that gleamed distinct

from the brown hollow of the decayed sycamore, and he pounced on it at once. The moon gave so much light in that open space that the lantern was hardly needed. Very carefully he detached the scrap of torn lace, for such it was, from the splinter of rough wood to which it clung, and examined it with wondering curiosity. "This is a bit of a sleeve, or a hankercher, or some of their women's fallals," he said, after a pause. "How come it here? She must have been putting her hand in here to take something out, or else to hide something, maybe a letter for the chap that didn't come—aha! If it's here now, my Lady Flavia, you and I are quits." And Big Ben thrust his great hand deep down into the hollow of the tree. "There's no letter," he growled; "nothing of the sort. Here's something, though!" And out he drew the morocco case, with a shout of triumph.

With some fumbling, he undid the clasp,

and to his infinite surprise found it was the miniature of a lovely child with clustering ebon curls and blooming face. He stared at it without being in the slightest degree enlightened by what he saw. Nor did the pearl-setting inspire him with any particular covetousness. He had, indeed, no especial idea of the value of the pearls, and, besides, they might be beads, for aught he knew. Why his late lord's wealthy daughter should steal thus mysteriously out at dusk to conceal this portrait, was a riddle beyond his solving. He could not account for it by any of the rude and simple principles by which he was used to test the motives of human conduct, and at last set it down to that incomprehensible taste for "play-acting" that he believed young ladies to be possessed by. "Silly wenches! good hard work would do 'em a deal of good," he said, looking contemptuously at the miniature, as it lay in his horny palm; "but, some-

how, she looked a deep one too. What's this writin' here?" And Ben turned his lantern on the painted ivory more fully than before; but all his efforts to decipher the words "Lady Flavia Clare" were in vain. Ben could read a little, that is, he could make out the plainest and blackest of print, by the joint exertions of eyes, fingers, and tongue, a few words at a time, but even that was very fatiguing work. As for making out the delicate characters scratched on the tablet by the artist who painted the likeness—that was as hopeless a task as if the name had been written in Hebrew letters. At last he shut up the case and thrust it into his pocket. "I'll show the thing to Jane," said the keeper, as he extinguished his lantern, and returned to pick up his gun and go his rounds. "Jane's a scholar, and can tell me what's written here. She won't blab about it, neither, Jane won't, without I give her leave, for she knows I'd twist

her neck if she did." Now Jane Haynes was the keeper's eldest daughter, and she had lately been received as one of the under-housemaids at Harbledown.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CHÂTEAU DES ROCHES.

THE *salon d'honneur*, or grand reception-room in the Château des Roches, commune of Grèsnez-Vignoble, near to the town of St. Germain, and within sight of the shining Seine, was the room that most of all retained some traces of its antique splendour. It was of ample extent, though too long in proportion to its width, and too low. But although this mode of construction gave it rather the air of a gallery than of a drawing-room, it was a fine apartment still, with its five windows, its frescoed ceiling, its walls in panel, its floor in parquet, and its cornices and pilasters rich with gilding, not yet entirely blackened by time. Yet

it was a melancholy room, and never could it have looked more melancholy than on one damp October evening, when Mrs. Royston sat straining her eyes over some curious piece of needle-work that she called white-seam, or cross-stitch, or by some such queer feminine designation, while her husband strode impatiently to and fro, like a caged bear, making the dark oaken planking ring beneath his heavy heels.

The apartment was scantily furnished, and scarcely any two objects seemed to match one another. One or two tables, an *armoire* of black wood, and a high-backed elbow-chair, on the back of which a coronet was carved, belonged to the house, and had escaped alienation as unsaleable commodities, for which no modern broker would give a five-franc piece. To the same category belonged the pictures on the walls, stiff family portraits, in tarnished frames, exhibiting their wigs and armour, silken coats

and lace ruffles, their rouge, and powdered hair, and hoops, and patches, and satin sacques, and diamond stomachers, to the unsympathising eyes of a generation that neither knew nor cared to know their names. Part of the furniture was English, cheap, flashy upholstery, bought at a London auction, in the second and less reputable period of Mr. Royston's career, and now much the worse for wear, with casters lacking, and veneer split away piecemeal. The remainder had been picked up, second-hand, in St. Germain or Versailles, and had been chosen more for economical than æsthetic reasons. Especially was this the case with the miserable little square of carpet, which, as is not seldom the case in France, covered but a small portion of the floor; and on this island of red and black woollen the chairs and tables were crowded together, leaving the rest of the room bare. To be sure, the floor was of beautiful old oak,

black and smooth as jet, but it was dim and unpolished for want of careful rubbing and waxing, and wofully cold in winter. It was almost winter now. A small fire of green wood, sticks picked up in the garden for the most part, was sputtering and hissing on the broad hearth, and Mrs. Royston was evidently cold, for she shivered as she sat sewing, with her threadbare shawl tightly drawn around her shoulders. But she seemed afraid of appearing to be cold, or indeed, of doing any thing that might attract the notice of her irascible lord.

For more than an hour, Brand Royston had not opened his lips except to grind out a half-audible oath between his clenched teeth, as he strode up and down, making the room echo to his massive tread. His temper was never of the best, and age and poverty, and debts and duns, had made it sourer than before. And now, as he stamped heavily up and down, gnawing his

heavy moustache, and sometimes stopping in his walk to gaze out into the garden, where the yellow dead leaves came swirling down from the poplars at every puff of wind, Mrs Royston quaked inwardly as she watched him. She was a submissive wife, and a suffering one withal, and no Indian squaw ever cowered more abjectly before her plumed and painted consort than Elizabeth Royston before the ex-squire.

“No letter again. That lazy red-collared rascal of a postman must have gone past this hour or more,” said Brand Royston, stopping in front of the fire, and giving the smoky wood a peevish kick with his foot, an attention which the sorry fuel returned by sending up a fresh cloud of acrid vapour, and giving out less heat than before. “Not a word from the boy. He takes it coolly, I must say. Confound him !”

Mrs. Royston looked timidly up. “O Brand,” she said, “I do so wish Basil had

come back. I didn't know how lonely the house would be when he was gone, and——”

Mrs. Royston came to a dead pause, snapped her thread, and had much ado to get the needle threaded again in the dim evening light, though she was rather glad of some occupation that might serve to mask the confusion that she experienced; for poor Mrs. Royston, like many who live with choleric persons, and make it their painful study to avoid the giving of offence, was continually saying or doing something which drew down on her meek head the lightnings of her husband's indignation. So it was now.

“I'm obliged to you, Mrs. Royston. By the Lord Harry! “I'm obliged to you, ma'am. You're to be pitied, forsooth, because you are left here with only your husband to keep you company, and you find it dull. Dull! By Jove, I was not aware

what an honour you did me, madam, when you condescended to marry me, and be hanged to you. I thank you for enlightening my ignorance, by George, but I do."

The squire's thundering voice made his wife quiver like an aspen leaf; and to see the spaniel-like fashion in which she quailed before him, any bystander might have supposed that the poor trembler anticipated a blow from the broad hand that Brand smote upon the marble mantel-piece, by way of pointing his diatribe. But such was not the case. Brutal and reckless as Brand Royston was, he had never, drunk or sober, laid a finger on his wife. With all the man's innate savagery, some redeeming instinct kept him from maltreating a woman otherwise than with his terrible tongue, though that he used without mercy.

"By Jupiter!" resumed Royston, taking a fresh turn in the room, and viciously kicking a foostool that stood on the edge

of the island of carpet, "I remember the day I saw you first. I'd tooled over to York with the drag and a crack team I had then—all the bright bays with black points, and not half an inch difference between any of the four—a team I bought from Sir Tatton, and that stood me in four hundred and eighty guineas for the wheelers alone, by George! and I called on your father in Micklegate, about a little matter of a mortgage—Sir Vincent had rooked me sadly at chicken-hazard, and I was very hard hit indeed, and wanted the ready—and, by George, nothing would serve old Burt but we must lunch with him; and his daughter Bessy was sent for to take the head of the table; and that was how our acquaintance began, old lady. But if I'd known you'd have told me to my face you should find it a grievance to have no one else in the house, why ——"

Mrs. Royston here ventured on a tearful

interruption. "O Brand, dear, you know it isn't that," she said in her thin voice. "I should not feel it anywhere but here; but, O dear! this wretched house—now Basil's away—I hardly dare to go to sleep here, I feel so chilled and scared. O Brand, Brand, have pity on me—do, and let us go away—to Paris, to Versailles—anywhere out of this!"

She was weeping plentifully now, and her busy fingers had ceased to ply the needle. Her husband strode up to the table, and laid one hand upon it with a weight that made it creak as he bent down and looked her in the face.

"How often am I to tell you to hold your tongue, and to keep that nonsense to yourself?" he demanded sternly. "You're an idiot to harp on it as you do. Do you want to set the stone rolling that is to crush us all? Keep quiet, or you'll do more mischief than you think for. It's my belief

that that blockhead of a girl in sabots and an eared cap understands a deal more English than you give her credit for."

"What! Grosse Jeanne?" bleated Mrs. Royston feebly.

"Whom else could I mean?" austere-ly returned the squire. "I saw, no later than yesterday evening, when she was taking away the tea-things—and you, like a born gaby, must needs blurt out that the wind up-stairs in the passages sounded like the voice of some one shrieking for help—I saw her eyes twinkle. I'm convinced she has some idea in that thick skull of hers. We must get rid of her."

This was not, at the first blush of the thing, a very alarming remark; yet it seemed to produce a singular effect on Mrs. Royston. The pupils of her pale-grey eyes dilated with a strange horror as she glanced up at her gigantic husband, who, by this time, was standing with his back to the fire-

place, and with one elbow resting on the cracked marble of the chimney-piece. Twice Mrs. Royston tried to speak, and twice her voice proved treacherous; but at last she made shift to stammer out the words: "Get rid of her? Not—not—— You do not mean——"

And then she dropped her head upon her knees, covered her face with her thin shaking hands, and burst into a passion of crying, rocking her body to and fro the while, and appearing to be on the point of breaking out into a wail of noisy lamentation. Brand Royston smothered the fierce exclamation that rose only too readily to his lips. He knew his wife's moods well enough to be aware that intimidation in the present case would merely aggravate matters. He laid his powerful grasp, not unkindly, on her shoulder, and gave her a gentle shake.

"Why, Bessy, Bessy, my lass, what a goose you are!" said the squire, with a

rough attempt at soothing the half-hysterical weeper. "There's nothing to cry for, my girl, that I know of. All I meant was, that if that French jade suspects anything—ah, there you go again with the water-works—we had better pay her her wages, and trundle her out of doors on the first convenient opportunity. That's all; and now you know the long and short of it; so dry your eyes, and behave like a sensible woman, if you *have* brains in that head of yours."

Mrs. Royston rubbed her eyes with her damp handkerchief, and brightened up surprisingly. Hers was a shallow nature, quickly stirred and quickly calmed. It was with quite a chirping cheerfulness, like a silenced canary beginning to sing again after the uncovering of its temporarily darkened cage, that she thus made answer to the squire's consolatory speech: "I'm so glad, but you did frighten me, Brand, and

that's the truth. I'm sadly nervous since Basil went away, dear. I wish he'd write, if only a line. I suppose he got safe to London, though the wind was awful on the night he was to cross, and I'm sure I lay awake——"

Mr. Royston, who had resumed his promenade in the apartment, answered the first part of this discourse without waiting for the conclusion : "Safe to London! Of course he did! I suspect he found London too attractive to leave it in a hurry; and if so, he is engaged in flinging away the money I had such work to scrape together, to give him a start, in billiard-rooms or at Jermyn Street hells, by jingo! The lad's conceited enough to think no folks cut their eye-teeth except himself; but he'll find out his mistake—he will—and serve him right. I didn't rake up that cash—at fifty per cent. too—for Master Basil to play ducks and drakes with it. The elbow's been


shaken quite sufficiently in our family for one while, I should say ; and if I, matriculating early, as I did, at Knavesmire and on the Beacon course, and paying my footing smartly, too—hand and glove with nobs, by George, who wouldn't have taken Basil, smart chap as he thinks himself, for a stud-groom, with his airs and graces—Lord Bamford, and Jockey Blenheim, and Thornton, and Topham, and Sir Vincent, and Chesterton, and the Marquis—men that knew what life was, I can tell you——What was I talking about ?”

And the squire stopped, and rallied his wandering thoughts. It was not uncommon for Mr. Royston, who had an inveterate habit of bragging, and would pour his boastful talk for hours into the ears of his patient wife, when a better audience was not forthcoming, to ramble somewhat from the original text of his edifying monologues. But in Mrs. Royston he had a most excel-

lent listener, attentive to the thrice-told tales, and ever ready to laugh at the bad jokes that were resuscitated for her amusement. Nor was her admiration for her lord's past social triumphs, his wit, his daring, and his cleverness, by any means hypocritical. She had been brought up to reverence the Roystons, since her father, the York alderman, had been the son of a tenant-farmer on the Royston estate, and had more than once held a gate open for young Brand and his pony to pass by, when that infant sportsman of nine years old went clattering eagerly by after his papa's foxhounds. In after years, Elizabeth Burt had sat hearkening, like a buxom north-country Desdemona, to the young squire's narratives of his own adventures in flood and field; and indeed York rang with stories of the open hand, the strong arm, hard head, and reckless heart of rattling Brand Royston. When Bessy Burt was a

girl, it was thought quite natural that a high-spirited young gentleman should knock down watchmen, upset gigs, thrash bargees, hoax turnpike keepers, and paint the shop-fronts of obnoxious tradesmen scarlet or pea-green. These were the mildest and most innocent of Brand's amusements, and yet the respectable world forgave and smiled upon the prodigal, so long as he could pay his way.

He could not pay his way now; but Elizabeth his wife believed in him and admired him still in a scared fashion that suited her character. She was never weary of listening to his conversation, which turned mainly on his own exploits, or what he considered his wrongs; and though Brand at times spoke his mind pretty frankly on the subject of his own "infernal folly" in marrying "a tanner's daughter, without a drop of good blood in her veins, or a grain of sense in her head," she was



never provoked into retaliatory remarks with reference to her own wasted dowry, and the squire's self-wrought ruin. In truth, she was too timid to be otherwise than grateful all her life long for the condescension of so bright and particular a star as Brand Royston in deigning to seek a bride in the plebeian precincts of Micklegate. Brand had been her evil genius. He had brought her to poverty, to exile, and to sorrows and terrors that the after-course of this history must elucidate, but she never lost a sort of deferential love for him; and for his sake she had quarrelled utterly with her only surviving brother. Mr. Royston said that William Burt was a snob and a miserly hunk, and a rascal to boot; whereas, in truth, William's offence was, that having been robbed and cheated by his aristocratic brother-in-law, he declined to give or lend Mr. Royston any more money. The sister took her husband's

part, like a true wife, and the breach was a final one.

Thus it was that when Mr. Royston asked his wife what he was talking about, her answer was prompt and submissive: "You were talking of Basil, dear."

"Ay, so I was. I was saying that I didn't get him the money he carried away in his pocket for him to fling it out of the window of a London gambling-house," resumed Mr. Royston, kicking the unoffending footstool. "I gave it him that he might hold his head up with the best of them, and get a rich wife, and—— I wonder if its any devilry of *hers* that makes the boy silent!" And the squire came to a halt, and frowned darkly.

Mrs. Royston, who was busy with her sewing again, but had an eye always on her husband, dropped a stitch, and made answer soothingly: "Why should you think so, Brand, dear? They were such friends, you

know. She must be fond of Basil, I'm sure. Any girl might be glad to marry him."

There was a dash of maternal pride in the accent of the last few words. But Brand shook his head.

"I can't make her out," said the giant, with a sort of sullen wonder in his tone: "she faced *me*, and dared me to do my worst. Basil's a handsome fellow, but I doubt if she cares for him as much as we fancy she does; and if he tries to rein her up sharp, she'll soon kick over the traces, I can tell him that. She's a puzzle to me. I'm not superstitious, Bess, but, by Jove, if there was such a thing as being possessed by an evil spirit, I should believe that girl——"

Here the squire's speech was cut short by the entrance of Grosse Jeanne, the servant, in her peasant's costume of blue wool-len kirtle and black bodice, round white cap, earrings, red handkerchief, sabots, and

grey worsted stockings. "Notre Monsieur," said Grosse Jeanne, "old Nanon, the portress, has come up from the convent with the compliments of the Dame Supérieure, and has Monsieur or Madame received news of the health of the young *pensionnaire*—the *demoiselle* Clare?" The stout young peasant-woman was stolid of manner and appearance, but there was a sort of sly curiosity in her dull eyes, for all that, as she watched the start and knitted brow with which her master received the message. But Brand Royston quickly recovered his composure. "My compliments to the Dame Supérieure," he said blandly, and in very intelligible Anglo-French; "and say to Nanon, that when last I heard from England, Miladi Flavia Clare was in perfect health, residing at her cousin's house, Monsieur le Comte de Mortlake. And give Nanon a glass of wine after her walk Jeanne."

But when the stout serving-woman had had time to get well out of earshot, Mr. Royston turned to his wife, and said: "We must discharge that Grosse Jeanne on the first reasonable excuse, Mrs. R. Unless, to be sure, Basil succeeds at once, when we shall leave this rat-hole for ever and a day. But Grosse Jeanne must go. She knows too much, or thinks she does."

And for a long time Brand Royston was silent, busied with no pleasing thoughts.

CHAPTER X.

AN UNEXPECTED REPLY.

"IF you will take my advice, Augustus, you will speak at once. She likes you, I am sure; but she is so very young, and naturally fond of admiration; and when we take her to town next season, she is certain to be surrounded by men whose flattery and attentions may turn her little head, I am afraid. I do so wish you would speak at once," repeated the Countess of Mortlake; and she was thoroughly in earnest.

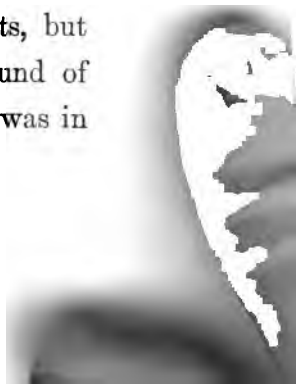
She had called her son into the pretty morning-room, with its rose-coloured hangings, that suited her complexion so well, and where she preferred to settle her domes-



tic affairs, and to pen letters to her many correspondents. A fire was burning in the grate, for the morning had been chilly, though the bright autumn sun had long since melted the hoar-frost with which the cold night had electro-plated the grass of lawn and park; and the countess, who loved warmth, sat near the fire, gazing at its friendly glow, and seeing the face of her daughter-in-law elect in every one of those ruddy caverns between the coals. For Lady Mortlake's mind was made up; she had set her heart on a marriage between her son and the late earl's daughter, and she would have conceived it her right to be justly indignant had any captious moralist called her a mercenary mother. The countess, a good woman, as the world goes, was convinced that she was actuated by the sincerest desire for the welfare of both the young persons principally concerned in the match. She really felt a warm affection for

Lady Flavia, and really believed that the very wisest course for that little lady to pursue would be to marry one so eminently calculated to be her safeguard and protector, her guide, philosopher, and friend, as Augustus, Lord Hythe. As for the propriety of keeping Cupley Lees and Melshot Friars, with a considerable sum of ready money—just the very thing lacking, by the way, to many a lord of uncounted acres—from going out of the family, Lady Mortlake did not permit her thoughts to dwell upon that subject. But it was a comfortable conviction, all the while, to know that, in a pecuniary as well as a moral and social point of view, the union of the cousins would be satisfactory.

Lord Hythe had caused the countess some anxiety—not, let me hasten to say, on the score of his wild or dissipated habits, but on the much more respectable ground of his backwardness where matrimony was in



question. He had seemed so wedded to hard work, hard thinking, and the severest labours of the political tread-mill, that he was unlikely to form any softer tie. He was so entangled in chains of red tape—for the member for Starvington had recently become a junior Lord of the Treasury—that it scarcely seemed probable that he would submit to wear chains of hymeneal roses. His mother and sisters had been at the pains to point out to him, in bygone seasons, more than one charming young creature, worthy to be the future Lady Hythe; but in vain. And there really was some fear that “dear Augustus” might subside into a mere celibate parliamentary hack, an irreclaimable “Bachelor of the Albany,” and the coronets of Hythe and Mortlake be lost to the Clares for ever. In Lady Flavia, the fond mother beheld at last the very daughter-in-law that she would have selected out of a thousand

maiden aspirants for the honour of her son's hand. It was evident that her wit and beauty had produced an effect on the somewhat stoical nature of Lord Hythe; while her extreme youth and inexperience would, of course—so the countess argued—render her as plastic as wax. Hythe was the best of sons and of brothers, and would be the best of husbands; supplying the ballast of wisdom to the matrimonial firm, and guiding his brilliant partner with judicious kindness through the perilous voyage of life. It is more than probable that Lady Mortlake had never heard of Aristotle's axiom, that the husband should be thirty-six, the wife eighteen, in a well-assorted marriage; but of her own accord, she had arrived at the Stagyrte's conclusion. To be sure, her son was not above one-and-thirty, but his abilities and acquirements were worthy of riper maturity; while Lady Flavia, at eighteen, was

to all appearance a bright, light-hearted child, singularly young for her years.

"All very well," said Lord Hythe, smiling in his good-humoured way; "but suppose she doesn't care a straw about me? I can't marry her by force, by torch-light in the castle chapel, like the girl—what was her name? Miss Byron, I think—in one of the old Anne Radcliffe romances; can I?"

But Lady Mortlake was not to be laughed out of her pet project, and she fell to work again with the old arguments, clenching them with such illustrations as her woman's wit could supply. Her son listened dutifully enough; the long habit of public life had made him tolerant of all expressions of opinion whatsoever, and, besides, there was something within his own breast that lent its echo to his mother's words. At last, he made answer: "Well, mother, at least I see that it would make you, and my father,

and Ju and Carry, all happy, if I were to marry Flavia; and I assure you I should like my wife, if ever I have one, to be a person whom my family could love. But, after all, the principals in a marriage are those who ought to be the surest of knowing their own minds. Now, I hardly know mine; and as for Flavia's—mother, I can't comprehend that young girl one bit. Either she is deeper than you think, or——”

“O Augustus, for shame! Flavia deep! An innocent thing, bred up in a convent, and knowing nothing of the world; nothing!” exclaimed the countess.

“Or,” pursued her son, “I am even a duller fellow than I thought myself. That, very likely, is the case. I change my mind about Flavia every day, ay, and oftener too. There have been times when I could have worshipped her—so young, and lovely, and childlike in her pure



unconsciousness of evil did she seem; but then, again, doubts come up, conjured into existence by trifles, a mere look or tone. That laugh of hers I never quite liked, though what business has a grave old fellow like me to criticise a young girl's laugh, enough if I say that I don't believe she cares for me, and I only hope it may not end in my being fool enough to care too much for her." And here, as if he had said more than he intended to say, Lord Hythe reddened, and left the room. Presently, his mother saw him, thoughtful and somewhat dejected of mien, pass along the great avenue of the park, with Leo following him, and in a few moments he was lost to view at a turn in the winding road.

But Lord Hythe's solitary walk on that day was not destined to be a long one. Scarcely had his stalwart figure passed out of sight of the front windows of Harble-

down, before a sound of wheels made the young man lift his head and recognise Lady Flavia's pony-carriage, the two fiery little black steeds that drew it, and its beautiful owner, looking prettier than ever in her small hat with its white feather, the braided velvet paletot that fitted like wax to her small waist, and the long white gauntlet gloves on the tiny hands that held the whip and reins so lightly and firmly. Lady Flavia drove very well and fearlessly, but with perfect ease, short as her experience of charioteering could have been. Her ponies were mettled little nags, hard to keep in order; but with her they went like lambs, to the wonder of the Harbledown stable-yard. She pulled them up, now, as she came abreast of her kinsman, who took off his hat in semi-serious salute.

"I thought Caroline was with you" said Lord Hythe, who had seen his sister

and cousin set out together behind the black ponies.

Lady Flavia said "Yes;" and proceeded to explain how they had visited the village schools together, where Lady Caroline was busy in examining into the proficiency in biblical geography to which the pupils had attained under a new instructress.

"And I took a class, too," said the girl with a pretty piteousness of tone that heightened her attractions, and shaking her raven ringlets the while; "but I got into sad, sad disgrace. I made the little ones laugh so much. And the certificated mistress—an awful person, Minerva in blue spectacles—looked at me as though she would eat me, and protested against my telling them French fairy tales—all I could tell them, you know, for I'm in a state of melancholy ignorance about useful learning; and even Caroline lost patience, and declared I was ruining the discipline of the school.

So I was turned out in disgrace, and here I am." And this time, there was music, indeed, in her laugh, as she finished the tale of her discomfiture. Lord Hythe laughed too.

"I am afraid," he said, "that the gravity of much more imposing assemblies than a village school would not be proof against your insidious assaults. Here we are, close to the garden;" for all this time the pony-carriage had been slowly advancing, Lord Hythe walking beside it with one hand on the splash-board. "Will you leave your Bucephali to James's care, and take a turn with me on the terrace? I want to ask your advice about the orangery. Jones wants it to be in the rectangular British style, while my sisters are crazy for a Moorish pavilion. I should like to know what *you* approve of, Lady Flavia."

They were cousins, and very good friends, and he was by much her senior; but he very seldom ventured to call her by her

Christian name without its formal prefix. All the family felt, in a greater or less degree, the same difficulty. No one could be less reserved, less punctilious or exacting, than the late earl's daughter; but yet with all her infantine ways and affectionate bearing, the Clares treated her as if she had been a stray princess that had in some way dropped into their family circle. They felt, with all their claims to blue blood, and their experience of society, as if the clay of which they were composed was not of such a dainty quality as that of which their kinswoman was moulded. She was very affable and gentle, gave herself no arrogant airs, such as purse-pride not seldom inspires in heiresses, and never said a cross word. But the earl and his countess, and the ladies Caroline and Julia, and all the servants beneath their roof, and the lawyer, and the vicar and his family, and such of the county notables as had seen the orphan girl, agreed

that she was somehow an ideal aristocrat, a lady of Nature's own making.

It was Lady Flavia's practice to accede to all requests the granting of which entailed no sacrifice, and she readily accepted the aid of her cousin's arm, and stepped out of the low pony-carriage. Then they made their way towards the gardens, and Lady Flavia glanced back with a wicked little laugh of amusement at the sight of her four-footed pets, lately so quiet, now snorting and buck-jumping in a manner that gave James the groom an immensity of trouble. Jibbing, rearing, and sidling, the restive little nags, the carriage, and the tiger, with a very white face beneath his gold-laced cockaded hat, and both hands taking a very desperate clutch of the milk-white reins, disappeared in the direction of the stables.

"They never behave so with me," said Lady Flavia demurely, in answer to her cavalier's remark that the ponies "were too

hot for safe driving." And then they entered the gardens through the very gate by which, on a foggy evening, a few days earlier, Lady Flavia had passed on her way to the fir plantation where she had hidden the portrait—that portrait that was now, in company with wads, nipple wrenches, Eley's cartridges, and wires, at the bottom of one of the baggy pockets of Big Ben's velveteen coat. But it was in the full belief that the miniature was safely stowed out of sight of human eyes, that she who had hidden it paced so calmly on the long terrace by the side of her relative, Lord Hythe. This terrace was at the further side of the gardens; and a broad lawn, dotted with clumps of rhododendron, lay between it and the house, while at either end some tall trees quite cut off the raised bank from the sight of those who might be gazing from the windows of the western wing. At the end of the terrace nearest to the fishponds, the

projected orangery was to be built, and hither Lord Hythe conducted his cousin.

“Moorish, or not Moorish—that is the question,” said he pleasantly. “Shall we take safe refuge in the no-style of the George the Third epoch of sober brick and mortar, or shall we ‘go in’ for a slice of the Alhambra?”

It would have puzzled the member for Starvington afterwards to explain how it came about; but he, somewhat to his own surprise, found himself giving his cousin an animated description of the superb remains of Moorish art that still adorn the thriftless realm of Spain. Lord Hythe was the least boastful of men. He never dilated on his travels, nor teased the stay-at-home folks with whom he kept company with accounts of the wonders of the South and East; but now he was betrayed into something like enthusiasm, and only stopped in a glowing dissertation on the beauties of the Alcazar,

its wealth of colour and lavish magnificence, when he saw that his listener's blue eyes were glistening with tears, and that a deep flush of excitement had suffused her fair face.

"It is nothing"—and the girl turned her head away—"nothing! Only—only you were painting it all so well, that I seemed to see it—all those beautiful, beautiful things that I shall never see—and I was a little goose; that's all." And she gave a little sob, and was silent. He took her hand; he could do no less; but in truth he was himself strangely moved at the sight of her distress, and when a cold man is once thawed, prudential scruples are as dust in the balance.

"But why should you *not* see them?" he said consolingly. "I did not know, on my soul, that you cared seriously for sweet scenery and glorious architecture. What a treat it would be to revisit those places—

Granada, Seville, Cordova, with you, dear Flavia!"

The little hand in his clasped his fingers with a very, very slight pressure, but one that sent the blood coursing like fire through the veins of Augustus, Lord Hythe.

"You are very kind, Cousin Augustus," said the girl, looking up at him. Her brow was as innocently smooth as the brow of a seraph; her cheek bloomed like the rose; her blue eyes were swimming in tears; and there was something wistful, yet coy and timid, in their glance. Lord Hythe must have been more or less than man had he held out.

"Cousin!" he exclaimed, keeping the trembling hand imprisoned in his grasp; "let me be more than a cousin to you, Flavia, darling! beautiful, dear Flavia! Be my wife; let me have something at last to love and cherish; let me give you a love that is

at least honest and constant, grave and old, and staid as I must appear in your young eyes, dear ; but listen, dearest—listen, while I tell you what my own heart tells me now that I loved you from the first.” And much more did he say to the same purport—pleading, promising in all sincerity to love and cherish her ever ; declaring that her wish should be law, running through all the gamut that lovers have chanted since the days of Adam and Eve, no doubt. Starvington would hardly have recognised her M.P.

For a long time, Lady Flavia listened, and made no answer, beyond a murmur like the low coo of a dove, uttered once and again, and this the young man of course interpreted into assent ; but presently she withdrew her hand from his, looked him full in the face, and modestly but firmly said : “ Cousin Hythe, you have done me a great honour, and paid me a great compliment.

I regret that I cannot accept it. I like you, and respect your character. I think, my lord, that your wife would be in fault if she were not a happy woman. But I must say No."

Her eyes were quite dry now. Her tone was serious and womanly. The pretty pouting child was transformed, and there was real feeling in her tone and look, but no signs of hesitation.

"No is the feminine of yes," said Lord Hythe smilingly, as he tried to take her hand again. But it soon became manifest that this was not a maxim of universal application. In vain Lord Hythe pleaded his cause; in vain he urged that perhaps she was taken by surprise; that he had been too abrupt; that perhaps if she would talk it over with the countess, who loved her already like her own child, &c.

At last, she begged him to desist; and this time so seriously, that a gentleman

could not disobey. Lord Hythe was a gentleman at heart. He walked in silence by her side up to the house, and there she gave him her hand with a frank but sad smile, and went up-stairs to her own apartments. He stood in the hall, dejected and cut to the heart. His sister, Lady Julia, came down hastily from the countess's room.

"Oh Augustus, have you spoken to her? I am so glad," she said; but her brother's face was not that of a successful admirer.

"I have spoken to her. Some one has been beforehand with me, I'm afraid; and yet that's impossible—brought up in a convent, too. Say no more, Ju, just now. The girl is more of an enigma than ever." And there ended the conversation.

CHAPTER XI.

A CORNER OF THE VEIL IS LIFTED.

SHAKSPEARE, when he drew the portrait of Titania, the petulant elfin queen, at the height of her quarrel with King Oberon, must surely have been haunted by such a face and such a figure as those that belonged to the occupant of the pretty pink rooms in the west wing of Lord Mortlake's mansion. Be that as it may, a student of the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, could he have, Asmodeus-like, unroofed Lady Flavia Clare's own particular suite of apartments, immediately after her rejection of Lord Hythe's matrimonial proposals, might have imagined that he had before his eyes the

actual presence of the Fairy Queen herself. There was the same air of baby royalty about the proud pure brow, about the carriage of the graceful little head, about the very tread, that are essential to the true rendering of the moody majesty of elf-land. A starry diadem would well have become that haughty little head ; a rainbow-tinted wand would have been no unmeet sceptre for that small white hand—small, but not weak, and which crisped and clenched itself fiercely, as if its owner longed to tear some invisible object of hatred limb from limb.

She threw down her hat and driving-gloves, shook back the heavy mass of her curls, and looked long and steadily at her own reflection in the great pier-glass before her. The glass had seldom, perhaps never, imaged back so much beauty—certainly not beauty of so peculiar a character. That rippling flood of ebon hair would alone have been the pride of a plainer woman,

and she wore it according to her own pleasure, in her careless childish fashion, in spite of the feeble remonstrances of the countess and her daughters. But though the Ladies Caroline and Julia felt themselves in duty bound to protest against irregular modes of wearing the hair, they were hardly sorry to find that the little rebel, to whom their advice was addressed, chose to keep to her wilful way. It would have been a pity, they owned, to imprison all those glorious waves of glossy silken ringlets in plain tight braids, like those worn by ordinary mortals. The heavily-twining curls suited their owner too—a youthful, sunny creature, whose life seemed to be all summer. But she looked angry enough now, as she stood gazing at her own face in the glass, and from her blue eyes flashed the cold incisive glitter, as of steel suddenly drawn, that rarely sparkled there, and never without deep meaning in

its ominous lustre. Her lips were slightly parted, and her little white teeth gleamed between them like those of a tiger-cat.

"I did not dare!" she said, in a low bitter tone of rage. "I led him on to speak. Yes, my woman's heart craved that poor triumph. But I could not accept the offer, though I schemed and planned to bring it about. I—I—Flavia Clare, was obliged to yield up what I had resolved to win, but dared not retain. I, who have dared so much, am baffled now. I—dared—not—accept." She uttered these last words very slowly, and with a kind of cruel relish of the very pain they evidently cost her; and then her eyes shone like daggers flashing forth at a tyrant's breast, and a flush of wrathful colour turned her pale cheek to scarlet. "So much the worse for me—so much the worse for others," she murmured in a more subdued tone, and she turned away. In a moment more, she

was singing to herself as she moved about the room, taking off the braided paletot of black velvet which she had worn out of doors, smoothing the troubled gloves that had been so roughly plucked off, caressing the dainty hat and its crushed feather—all of which were somewhat the worse for the brief ebullition of temper, of which they had been the unoffending victims. The smile had come back to her lips; the dangerous light was no longer to be seen in her blue eyes, lucid as a Grecian sky, and all her pretty, half-unconscious graces of look and movement had returned. In a wonderfully short time, she had made ruffled feather, and squeezed hat, and crumpled gauntlets, nearly as trim and new as before she had used them with such abrupt disfavour. She was in the habit of doing much more “for herself,” as the phrase goes, than are most young damsels of her position. Simmons considered herself as

rather an injured person than otherwise, in having so much easier a place than she had anticipated. But her mistress said, with playful peremptoriness, that she had been accustomed to wait on herself while at the convent of Our Lady of Carmel, and that she had not the slightest intention of following any other rule than that of her own whims. Accordingly, though Simmons secretly grumbled that her lady was not delivered into her hands like a lay-figure, to be dressed and laced, combed and padded, tightened and tormented, according to her will and pleasure, she was forced to content herself, like a member of the *noblesse de robe*, in old France, with her *grandes entrées*, and to leave her mistress alone until the half-hour bell should announce the approach of dinner-time.

It is not impossible that Lady Flavia Clare had reasons of her own for declining to submit herself to the condition of abso-

lute helplessness which her Abigail—who was a person of vast experience, having served the daughters of three peers, who were civil to her; the spoiled only child of a great brewer, who treated her with a harsh insolence which, as the maid said, “flesh and blood couldn’t endure, not at no salary;” and the offspring of a bishop, who was, I believe, afraid of her—considered a necessary adjunct of aristocratic existence. For the orphaned daughter of the late master of Harbledown had need of some place and time for thoughts, and deep thoughts too, to judge by the frown that not seldom darkened that candid brow, behind which one might have fancied no cares weightier than such as concerned the hue of a ribbon or the trimming of a ball-dress could harbour. She had a habit, too, much less frequent in real life than it is in books, and never very general with her sex, that of thinking aloud. As a rule, people who

indulge in the perilous practice of soliloquy, are either hermits, unused to any company but their own, or they are those who, from disposition or necessity, act a part when before the world. But it would surely have been rash to include Lady Flavia Clare in either of these categories, though she was somewhat addicted to the trick—for a trick it is—that has supplied our playwrights, from the Swan's days downwards, with much of their best opportunity for the dissection of the human heart.

Tap, tap! went some discreet knuckles against the door of the pink sitting-room, and Lady Flavia, from the pink bedroom, bade Simmons come in. But it was not Simmons who entered, with deferential cough and rustling silken skirt, in the pocket whereof jingled the keys of office; it was Benson—Benson the housekeeper—and she brought with her a letter, lying on a little silver-gilt salver.

"I beg your ladyship's pardon"—indeed, she said la'ship and parding, for years of rule over an earl's domestics had not obliterated the original Cockney in the house-keeper—"but an answer being required, and Simmons having stepped out as far as Rev. Mr. Blick's at the vicarage, I brought the letter myself."

There was no apparent need for Mrs. Benson's apologetic tone; but the servants, with that fine instinct which servants have, all stood in great awe of doing or saying anything that might occasion displeasure to Lady Flavia. In their eyes, she was a very, very grand lady—much grander than the present earl's daughters—much grander than the countess, whose bread they ate, and whose hests they did. Many causes may have co-operated to bring this about, such as the fact, that the orphan girl was born in the purple, so to speak, and that nothing but her sex and the quasi-Salic law

of entail prevented her from possessing Harbledown in her own right; while the Hythe family had always been poor for a baronial household. But it is probable that the estimation in which Lady Flavia Clare was held depended mainly on personal character, on the same causes which made Leo her slave, and the black ponies submissive to her guidance. The lookers-on, it is said, see most of the game. Certainly, there are those whose dispositions are better understood in the kitchen, where they do not pass their time, than in the drawing-room, where they do. So in Harbledown, all gave way to this young girl, who never said one unkind word to her inferiors, who was always polite to every one, yet who, by some delicate tact, seemed to give her courtesy the weight that attaches to the civilities of royalty itself. The grooms never kept her waiting when she suddenly ordered round her ponies. The old coach-

man never grumbled when she took him and his great iron-grey horses up the most back-breaking hills, through the narrowest lanes, or over the most stony moorland tracks, in the country round. Jones, the head-gardener, lost his pomposity and his Latin when he offered her floral homage in the shape of bouquets of his best flowers. Mrs. Benson would have let her turn the house, to use her own figurative phrase, "out of windows," without so much as a moan of remonstrance.

Lady Flavia was gracious to Benson. She took the letter, opened it with fingers that did not tremble. Ah! how that little hand had quivered in Lord Hythe's grasp, and yet if the heart that belonged to the hand's owner beat quickly then, it throbbed wildly now. But deferential Mrs. Benson could not see into Lady Flavia's heart. She did not know how fast the pulses beat, how swiftly ebbed and flowed the rushing

blood, under that mask of ice. The becoming light reflected from the rose-pink hangings allowed even the paling hue of the tell-tale cheek to pass unnoticed, and the housekeeper only saw a young lady, who, with an air of easy indifference, was glancing over the contents of the letter.

“O dear, how tiresome!” Benson pricked up her ears, for she was not without her fair share of curiosity, and the letter was certainly in a man’s handwriting, a great, bold, black hand, and sealed with a big red seal, on which were armorial quarterings not a few. “O dear, how tiresome! I cannot write just now. Say, if you please, I will send an answer.”

These words, spoken with consummate coolness, sent Benson down-stairs to tell the under-butler to tell the messenger, now refreshing himself with ale and beef in the servants-hall, that he might go back empty-handed, for her ladyship would send an

answer. We may be pretty sure that that messenger, an oafish lad, sub-hostler at a second-rate inn, had been fairly pumped for such intelligence as could be extracted from him. But neither John nor Jane, nor Susan nor Mr. Hedstall, the coachman (who had driven three Earls of Mortlake), nor even the great Mrs. Cook (for the earl had not, as yet, enlisted foreign talent in the shape of a white-capped *chef*), could find out anything but that the lad came from the *Nag's Head*, at Chartley Parva, three miles from Chartley Town; and that the "genelman" who committed the letter, with half-a-crown and a curse, to his keeping, was a tall young chap, "main" well dressed, and who smoked cigars, wore moustaches, and had the look of a soldier-officer. His name had not transpired, but he had already spoken to the landlord on the subject of purchasing a likely saddle-horse, whence it was conjectured

that he meant to make some stay in those parts.

Meanwhile, Lady Flavia Clare read the letter over once, twice, thrice—it was not a long one—and then she tore it deliberately into fragments so small, that if Hop-o'-my-Thumb had used the pieces to mark his way back along the winding road to the home of his unnatural parents, he would have wanted keen eyes to distinguish those tiny snow-flakes of white paper. She seemed to take some sort of pleasure in the destruction of this letter, and when she had rent the paper into the minutest possible state of subdivision, she carried the heap into the next room, threw it into the fire, and watched the flames devour it. Then she went back, walking with a slow, uncertain step, like one recovering from a long illness, and there was an ashen-grey tint spread over her lovely face, like that which darkens the faces of the dying. She held up her right

hand, that pretty little white hand, with its dimples and its slender fingers, tipped by such nails as we do not see twice in our lives, perhaps—transparent, filbert-shaped, rose-coloured—a hand so beautiful that it would have seemed an outrage against taste to put gemmed rings upon its fingers. “There is no stain, is there?” she said, in a low dreary voice; “no stain like that on the hand of Lady Macbeth. Ah! what right have I, with my convent breeding, to know so much as the name of the wicked thane’s wicked wife. Bah! we are wiser in the nineteenth century. We don’t commit our crimes in the old coarse way, and the blood is not to be seen on our palace floors any more. But, knowing what I know, and being what I am, you have done a wise deed, Basil Royston, to come here and try to bend me to your will. A wise deed! But wait, and see the end of it!” And here an involuntary shudder crept

over her from head to foot, and she turned away from the looking-glass, and, with a smothered cry of actual pain, flung herself down on the bed, and writhed there, like a crushed worm. "Oh, give me back my old self—give me back the days that are gone, when a living human heart was in my breast, and not this fire and gnawing torment:" such were the wild words that broke from her lips, wrung forth by no counterfeited anguish. "Let me dare to pray! let me look at innocent children without feeling as if there were a great gulf fixed between their lot and mine; as if I were in my place of punishment, but in view of Eden and its radiance. Ah me! I am surely one of those accursed ones, with a heart of fire in their tortured breasts, that roam in the Halls of Eblis—I read of such things once in a strange book—*Vathek*—was it not—but I did not know how true those seeming fantasies could be. Yes, I

suffer already but not often—I am so hard. Yes, I am not often such a fool, whining like a sick school-girl.” And here she slowly rose, and lifted her haughty little head with the old imperial prettiness. “I serve a master who allows of no drawing back on the broad downward road. I have chosen, and must be firm to the black banner. But I am no dupe, to work for others. What I have done was for myself, not for them. And I will be Countess of Mortlake yet.”

By this time she was in front of the pier-glass again, and with a woman's instinct, was adjusting her crushed dress, and smoothing back the tangled masses of her unrivalled hair. “I will be Countess of Mortlake yet, a peeress of England, and a queen of fashion. I shall make some stir among them—those pale inanities—in their Belgravian drawing-rooms. Hythe will be proud of his wife. He is a good fellow, a good, dear fellow—

even I see that. Had I been as I once was——” Then came a long pause, and then again she spoke: “Had I been the romantic idiot I once was, I should not have been content with a red-tape husband, nurtured on blue-books. There is no political career, in England, for a woman. These are not the beautiful duchess, and “Buff and blue Mrs Crewe.” But Hythe is a gentleman, the soul of honour; a hard-working, honest, clever man. He will be a cabinet minister. He will be a marquis, and I shall be his wife. And when I die, I shall be buried in a crimson velvet coffin, with silver-gilt handles, and the bells will toll, and the people will take off their hats as the stately hearse goes by; and the marble under which I lie shall tell future ages what a paragon I was, what a good woman, what a good wife. Yes, but there will be no lie in that. I mean to be a good wife. I mean to be kind to the poor, to go to

church, to do my duty in the station in which I am placed, to live and die the best of all the peeresses in the Red Book. Those are my wages—the good-will, the homage, the admiration of the silly world. *Va!* I must play my part out, and be the same to the last. After all, *che sara sara!* Fatalism is a comfortable opiate for such as I am. But, Captain Basil Royston, what a much, much wiser man you would be if you would but leave me alone to take my course, and face my destiny. Well, *che sara sara*, say I for the second time.” And she bathed her burning face and eyes in fair water; and after a little while she went down-stairs, beautiful and fresh, without a cloud upon her forehead, and, to all visible seeming, without a care upon her mind.

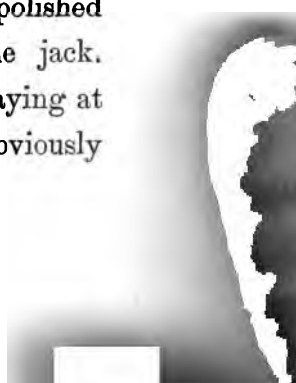
CHAPTER XII.

A STORMY INTERVIEW.

THE *Nag's Head* in Chartley Parva is a large straggling hostelry of the old sort, one of those inns whose sanded floors, diamond-paned windows, large garden, ivied front, and rose-draped porch, suggest the idea of such a place of entertainment as Izaak Walton's Piscator would have elected to dine in on a dish of buttered eggs, a tankard of nut-brown ale, and some trout of his own catching. Nothing could be less like a modern hotel on the limited liability principle; and nothing could be more inviting to an angler or an artist than the *Nag's*

Head, standing as it did at the end of Chartley village street, and only a stone's throw from one of the finest trout-streams in the county, a stream, too, of whose length two miles could be fished by leave and licence of the landlord.

But late October is not exactly the best season for the practice of the gentle art of sticking steel barbs into the mouths of the Salmonidæ; and there were no anglers just then at the rambling old inn, nor any artists to sketch, for the fiftieth time, its picturesque tumble-down front, with the figures 1693 above the porch; or to stroll about its quaint shady garden, where was a bowling-alley, on whose smooth turf Parson Adams and Squire Western, and Mr. Allworthy too, very probably, had long years ago directed their polished globes of beech-wood against the jack. However, there *was* a gentleman staying at the *Nag's Head*, and one who obviously



thought his consequence somewhat impaired by his having to put up with such rustic head-quarters. He was, in truth, a swearing, swaggering gentleman—it was thus the host judged him—and ill-humoured whenever anything went contrary to his desires; but a gentleman still. He had excellent clothes, a heavy portmanteau, and plenty of loose silver, which he tossed about like one born to spend; while he was just as ready to bestow a curse or a cuff on those who offended him, as to fling his contemptuous largesse of half-crowns to those who pleased his fancy. He had lately given charge to landlord, landlady, chambermaid, barmaid, and waiter—which last functionary held the posts of tapster and boots as well—that any letter or message addressed to Captain Royston was to be brought to him forthwith.

He stood in the window, with the dark-green ivy all round about him, like the

frame of a picture; and it was undeniable that he was a handsome, stalwart gentleman of goodly presence. Compared with him, Lord Hythe's honest face was very homely; whereas the face of Basil Royston was such as generally finds favour wherever ladies congregate. He was a fine florid specimen of the English stock, with waving chestnut hair, clear cut features, and a long tawny moustache shading his short upper-lip. His teeth were beautiful, and his smile pleasing. His brilliant hazel eyes were not quite so brilliant as they had been, perhaps, for now the whites of them were bloodshot and discoloured, and they had something of a hang-dog glance in them, with all their fierceness. No man can quite hold up his head when under a cloud; and Basil Royston, captain by courtesy, but a cashiered outcast, could not maintain the unruffled demeanour that he would have wished to do. He was ex-


pensively dressed—everything he wore was of the best materials—but his old correct taste had deserted him, or rather, being no longer the member of a recognised society, he had indulged his own natural fancy for bright colours and showy contrasts. Thus, he wore a glaring waist-coat, and a gaudy neck-scarf of crimson, and had too many rings on his fingers, too many charms on his watch-chain, too large a pin in his cravat. Trifles these, no doubt, but they spoke volumes of their possessor's state of mind.

The captain—so they said in the bar and in the tap—was a restless gentleman. He went out, trampling impatiently along the garden-walks, and spitefully beheading with his stick the great purple dahlias, like some dyspeptic Tarquin among his nobles. He went down the village street, kicking the curs asleep on the thresholds, and pushing angrily through the noisy little

gatherings of children disputing a moot-point at marbles; and then he would be back again in his ground-floor parlour at the *Nag's Head*, lighting a fresh cigar, and ringing the bell sharply for brandy. "A large glass, confound you; and look sharp!"

"The captain drinks a lot!" said the barmaid confidentially to the boots-waiter; and that man-of-all-work grinned as he made answer: "Wants a deal of winding up of a morning, Miss B. And don't his hand shake neither! Blest if I didn't think he'd have dropped the tea-cup at breakfast. But four goes of neat spirit before twelve o'clock is coming it rayther strong, ain't it?"

However, the "hair of the dog that bit you" recipe, murderous as it is, produced a temporary improvement in the nervous system of Captain Royston. His shaking hand grew steady; his bloodshot eye grew



brighter; he was quite, to all appearance, a hale and hearty man of nine-and-twenty as he stood in the window, puffing at his cigar, with his eyes gazing out upon the road.

At last it comes, a low, well-hung pony-carriage, drawn by two fiery black ponies, well kept in hand; a young lady in slight mourning, with a white feather like a snow-flake fluttering in the wind, holding the milk-white reins; and a smart young groom perched in the seat behind ready to jump down and run to the ponies' heads, as he does now. Out comes the hostler to ask what the lady may please to want; his own thoughts being intent on "bites" of hay, or drops of water for the washing of the ponies' mouths withal. But the captain knows better. He flings away his cigar into the grate, glances at his own image in the slip of glass over the chimney-piece—it is not women alone who peer at

themselves in mirrors — and settles his cravat. He is not in the least surprised when the landlady opens the door, and announces that a lady wishes to speak with Captain Royston. The lady is admitted. The landlady retires. The lady, not noticing the offer of a chair, still less accepting the hand that he extends towards her, lifts her veil. He winces, in spite of the brandy, before the defiant loveliness that confronts him with eyes that have no relenting in their blue depths.

“Upon my soul, you are prettier than ever!” blurted out the captain, hardly knowing what he said, as he again pushed a chair towards his visitor. She made him a low courtesy of ironical politeness, but her face was quite grave and cold.

“I did not come to hear compliments from you, sir,” she said, her hostility breaking out in every tone and gesture, in the curl of her lip, in the flash of her




eye, in the very erectness of the attitude in which she stood, one hand resting on the table : she looked upon him as if her sweet blue eyes had been the dreadful ones of fell Medusa, and could turn him into stone for ever.

He bit his lip, and the hand with which he stroked back his tawny moustache was tremulous, even after its owner's repeated doses of strong brown British brandy ; but he made an effort, and said smoothly : "Come, come, you are cross with me still, I see, though hang me if I deserve it ! You and I were such good friends once ; and I wish the pleasant old times could come back, as when I read poetry to you under the lime-trees, in auld lang syne, and——"

He had begun in an artificial tone enough, but as he went on speaking, he warmed to the matter of his discourse, and there was real feeling in his voice as he

spoke the last words, while his look softened, and it was easy to guess that at times there must be a dangerous fascination about the man. His was a corrupted heart, but there was probably a soft spot in it yet; and for one moment Basil Royston looked and felt as if there were no wicked schemes, no sinful pleasures, no courts-martial, infamy, penury in the world, but only a shady French garden, with a rustic seat, whereon sat two fair girls, while a tall, soldierly young fellow read Tennyson's *Maud* to them in a rich, low voice.

But Lady Flavia Clare interrupted him. "Excuse me," she said, "if I cut short your sentimental reminiscences. The past is gone. What might have been does not concern us who have to deal with things as they are. What do you want with me? You sent for me. Speak your mind, and speak it plainly, for I tell you distinctly that I will give you no future chance."




“What do you mean? Yes, what the deuce are you driving at?” exclaimed the young man, staring at the audacious speaker. “Are you vexed at my sending for you, as you call it? ’Pon my soul, I didn’t mean it in that light at all. I only thought, and the governor thought, that I couldn’t come up to the house—what d’ye call it—Harbledown—without a regular formal invitation from old Mortlake ——”

“And that,” again interrupted his pitiless acquaintance, “you are about as likely to receive as you are to be asked to dinner at Windsor, or to be appointed colonel of your old regiment, the Crashers.”

“Confound you, ma’am, can’t you be civil!” broke out the ex-captain in a fury; but instantly, as though seeming to remember his cue, awkwardly began to stammer out some words of apology: “You see you’re so hard on a man, why, too, pray, shouldn’t my lord ask me, if you make

him? I'll be bound you can turn every one of the lot round that pretty little finger of yours."

Lady Flavia Clare's eyes really seemed to emit sparks of blue light as she looked at the man before her. Her beauty was quite hardened now; and she gazed at the captain, his red cravat, his flaming waistcoat, his cheap jewellery, and flashy jauntiness of mien, with something very like loathing. "I hate myself"—she spoke the words passionately, but so quick and low was the utterance that no ear but her own caught their purport—"I hate myself for ever having given a thought to this ——" She left the sentence incomplete, and spoke plainly and audibly enough: "But I do not intend to ask Lord Mortlake to invite you. Are you so dull of wit that you cannot perceive my meaning, or must I tell you in so many words that I am ready for peace or war, at your will, but not for any



renewal of intercourse with you or yours !
You had better let me go my way in peace,
and ——”

Here it was Royston's turn to interrupt.
“By all that's sacred,” rapped out the captain, with an oath that cannot be written here, “our ways lie together. I begin to see your game, my dear ; but that cock won't fight, as my father says. I'm to be the catspaw, am I ? I'm to be your ladyship's very humble servant, kicked out like a rascal that has stolen the spoons. No, no, my lady, that sort of thing won't do with so old a hand as I am. I came over to England to make you my wife, and my wife you shall be ; and I can tell you a home-truth—if it wasn't for your money, I'd look elsewhere ; but a bargain's a bargain. It was all settled long ago, and you know it.”

Lady Flavia Clare looked less angry now. A mocking light began to replace

the wrathful glitter in her eyes, and her voice was much more amicable as she said: "I think you were mistaken in not stopping at home, and conducting your wooing by proxy. Your father would have made an abler plenipotentiary than yourself, Captain Royston, for to give him his due, he is a man, and a bold one. But you—— However, I don't want the ponies to catch cold while you and I exchange amenities. May I ask how you intend to hold me to my word, supposing, for the sake of argument, that I ever pledged my word to so utterly absurd a bargain as that of which you speak?"

Basil Royston reddened, and then grew very pale; and he tried to speak, but failed. His features worked painfully, as various expressions, rage, fear, wounded vanity, perplexity, passed across his face. Then he suddenly stepped forward, and caught hold of Lady Flavia's hand, saying, in a voice that was not wholly steady: "Come, dar-

ling, let this end. Let us be friends, as we once were. I was in a passion just now, and talked rubbish, but ——”

She snatched her hand away, and her eyes were ablaze with anger. Her voice was cautiously lowered, since inn-walls have ears, but it was cruelly distinct as she said : “Friends ! What can there be in common between a cashiered gambler, a broken cheat, a drunken debauchee, and the Lady Flavia Clare ? If you dare again to treat me with anything but the respect due to a lady whose acquaintance with yourself, formed beneath the roof of your parents, has induced her to bear with your rude language only too patiently, I shall leave the room and the house without delay. I did not come here to endure insult.”

“Remember !” said Basil Royston furiously, and he shook his uplifted forefinger at her as he spoke—“remember !”

“Remember ! Do you think I forget ?

No; but you would be wise to let your memory be somewhat shorter," said Lady Flavia, with a peal of her ringing joyous laughter, at the sound of which Basil Royston grew pale for the second time, and cast a wistful glance towards the table on which stood the empty glass that had held the last modicum of his insidious bosom-friend. But he was not defeated, only puzzled. He was not so brave as his father, not so shrewd, not so persevering, though in certain superficial graces he had at one time been very superior to the bluff fox-hunting squire. He rallied his spirits now, composed his features, and it was in a really resolute tone that he said: "I, too, if I pleased, might use hard words and ugly names, but that is useless now. I find you very much changed. I suspect you have seen some one among the swells with whom you live now, for whose sake you are willing to break your word to me. Were this



a common case of jilting I should not be ass enough to complain. I should take my hat and make my bow ; though I can't see why even a Clare should think herself degraded by marrying a Royston of Royston—my grandmother was Lady Elizabeth Pierrepont, too, by George ; but that's neither here nor there. The point to keep in view is, that I want Cupley Lees and Melshot Friars ; the governor wants the ready ; and the only way to bring matters right being for us two to marry——”

Lady Flavia Clare's manner changed as if by magic, and with a playful gesture she laid her little hand on the arm of her sulky companion : “Tell me one thing,” she said, “do you know how they execute criminals?—in France, I mean, you know, not in England. Don't they build up a horrid machine above the scaffold, with a great ugly knife that is drawn up by pulleys and cords, and then, when the poor

wretch is thrust through a hole in the planks, with a basket of sawdust beneath, to receive the head—how shocking!—don't they let the heavy knife fall swiftly down between its grooves, ah! so swiftly, swift as death itself, on the neck of the criminal? Flash! chop! and all is over; so humane, they say, so much better than our clumsy English hanging. Don't you think so, Captain Royston?"

And it was terrible to hear the laugh, so silver clear, so sweet, but with something in it that froze the listener's blood, which concluded these last words of Lady Flavia's. But equally terrible was it to mark their effect on Captain Royston. He sat down, shaking as if in an ague-fit, and great unwholesome blotches of crimson broke out on his pale forehead, and his dry white lips twitched quickly, and he looked quite haggard and old at nine-and-twenty.

He did not reply; but as Lady Flavia,

after a pause, went on to speak again, he winced as if she had struck him. He was indeed in a sorry state that morning—a “cup too low,” as he phrased it, after being many cups too high on the previous night, for he drank for drink’s sake now, not for company, as social toppers affect to do. Basil Royston’s hard-headed old father had not been very far wrong, after all, in his conjectures that his dissolute son would linger in London, and plunge into a vortex of such dissipation as only a great city can furnish forth. But Mr. Royston had guessed wrongly in one point—he had fancied, and not unreasonably, that his hopeful heir would lose or squander the moderate supply of cash, borrowed at heavy interest from an accommodating usurer, that he had carried with him. Such a contingency was probable enough. But a heavier calamity than empty pockets was impending over the head of Basil

Royston, and the first steps of the slippery path were strewn with flowers. He had indeed gambled and betted, just as his fond parent had predicted; but, instead of losing, he had won—he won what he called a “hatful” of money; and his anxiety to bring the business for which he had crossed the Channel to a satisfactory conclusion, caused him to leave London, much to the chagrin of his associates, before he had given the losers their “revenge.” But though he got off with unplucked feathers, his constitution, previously impaired by a wild life in India, had been severely tried by the late hours, the fierce excitement, and the almost incessant intoxication in which the last fortnight had been passed. Thus it was that the ex-captain’s nerves were less than ordinarily fit to endure a contest of wit and will, though even the results of unlimited alcohol and Haymarket champagne could not fairly

account for the prostrating effect which Lady Flavia's words had produced upon him.

She waited to let those words sink deep, and then resumed: "You wonder, I dare say, how I came to be aware of such dreadful doings, but even in convents we hear an echo of what goes on in the outer world. There was a little ivory model of a guillotine that stood under a glass case in Pierre the gardener's cottage at Grèsnez; a toy that his uncle had carved, he said, when he was one of the French prisoners at Norman Bridge in England, and which remained unsold at the Peace. Grosse Jeanne, too, told me once that she had been with a party of her friends to see an execution at Versailles; and the girl described the scene quite graphically—the hollow square of soldiery, the mounted gendarmes, the cart in which the culprit was brought, with a priest beside him, crucifix in hand; the

executioner — “Charlot,” they call him, instead of “Jack Ketch”—in his red cap, with bare arms, holding the string; the populace pressing on the square of bayonets that edged the scaffold; the bright blade poised aloft; every house-top crowded with eager faces—*c’était très amusant*—so Grosse Jeanne declared, honest girl——”

So far the cruel sweet voice went on unchecked; but at last a hollow groan interrupted it, and Basil Royston got up, leaning with both hands on the back of a chair, as if for support, and looked with haggard eyes at his visitor. “I can’t bear this,” he said sullenly; “and you—you dare to talk of these things in that cool way. But you shan’t frighten me; hang me if you shall! Why should I care for your queer notions? The thing’s absurd. You can’t hurt me without hurting yourself, so I’m safe.” There was a twinkle of reviving cunning in the young man’s hazel eyes, and he

snapped his fingers in sign of defiance. His voice had something of the old insolent tone in it as he went on : "I know too much of woman's ways, I flatter myself, to take 'No' for an answer. And we are playing a game at Brag, you and I. You will think better of it, Lady Flavia Clare, when you've had a little more time to see how matters really stand. I shall stay here a reasonable time, say three days, and then I shall expect to be asked over to Harbledown. If I get no invitation, I shall know that you prefer war to peace, and you will only have yourself to thank for what follows. By Jove, you'd better think twice about it before you make us desperate."

Lady Flavia's accent was one of cold politeness as she replied : "I have no wish to make any of you desperate; I merely decline the honour of being Lady Flavia Royston, that's all. But I never intended

to prove ungrateful for the kindness I once received from your family. For your mother I really feel a sort of affection. I shall be found willing, when my property is at my own disposal, to prove myself the best friend that the Roystons ever had. But, excuse me, Captain Royston, I prefer to manage my own affairs in my own way, and to discuss preliminaries, if need be, with your father, rather than with yourself. Him I intend to get invited at Christmas; and if you will lay aside your ridiculous matrimonial pretensions——”

“Ah! but that I never will,” said Basil doggedly.

“Then,” was the quiet rejoinder, “I have lost my time to no purpose, and cannot let my poor pets yonder run further risk of catching cold after their scamper. James, too, will wonder what evil has befallen me, for, I assure you, I am not in the habit of paying calls to gay *militaires*

like yourself, captain. Good-morning, but not, I trust for your sake, *au revoir*!" With a quick rustle of silk she was gone; and in a moment more Basil Royston saw her take her place in the carriage, receive the reins from the groom, and drive off at a brisk pace. He watched her until the high hedges concealed the last wave of the plume in her hat, and listened till the faint sound of the light wheels died away in the distance. Then he turned away from the window, with a sigh of mingled regret and relief. "Fifty times prettier than ever"—thus ran his outspoken thoughts; "but she is as hard as flint, for all the innocent smile and the blue eyes. What sort of stuff can she be made of, to carry it off like that; or doesn't she know the danger?" Here he paused, and rang the bell. "I wonder if she is a flesh-and-blood creature, like the rest of us. I could have fancied her a beautiful devil." And here the

waiter entered, and received Captain Royston's orders for a bottle of soda-water and a dash of brandy—"Just another glass, you know."

CHAPTER XIII.

BIG BEN RECEIVES A COMMISSION.

“How tiresome, mamma! Flavia won’t come with us. She insists on staying at home, naughty darling that she is!” said Lady Caroline Clare, who had grown to entertain a romantic friendship for her cousin—her cousin who had been a stranger a few months back. There was a battue in Tinningley Copse, which piece of woodland was with justice considered as the cream of the Harbledown preserves, and arrangements had been made for the party of gentlemen to lunch at the keeper’s house, whither sundry hampers of good-cheer, liquid and solid, had been previously con-

veyed; and there was a sort of half engagement to the effect that lady Mortlake and her daughters should drive round to the lodge in question; and should be present at the later portion of the sport. It was a fresh opportunity of becoming known to their country neighbours, before the round of Christmas banquets should commence. As yet, there had been a few rather heavy dinners at which the family had been guests; and once or twice, a select twelve or fourteen had rallied around the Harbledown mahogany; but the progress towards intimacy was not more rapid than it usually is where miles of road divide castle from court, and hall from abbey.

October seemed determined to die smiling; and if the nights were foggy or frosty, day after day had the mellow brightness peculiar to that soft season of the year. The woods were never more

enjoyable than now, while the red and russet leaves yet clung to the boughs, and before the November rains had turned the paths to quagmires. Some pleasant neighbours, pleasant at least, when gauged by a country standard, were to employ their guns to-day in the massacre of Lord Mortlake's pheasants, and were afterwards to dine at Harbledown. The afternoon was clear and sunny; the few white clouds had not a menace in them; everything promised well. But Lady Flavia chose, to the disgust of her cousins, and especially of Lady Julia, to shut herself up in her rooms, and not only refused to join the party, but to decline giving any reason for her obstinacy.

The carriage was at the door, not the lofty family chariot over which Mr Hedstall presided, but the open barouche, with the four bays, and the trim postilions, with a little silver tassel sprouting out of the black

velvet of their caps. The countess was dressed, so were her daughters, and there was no time to lose if they meant to be at the keeper's before the sportsmen should have gone back to their work of semi-wild-poultry slaughter.

"Flavia won't come—nonsense!" said the countess incredulously; and then, after a moment's thought, she nodded her head with an air of ineffable matronly wisdom. "Ah! to be sure! she feels a sort of awkwardness about meeting Augustus after what I must call her unaccountable whimsicality in rejecting him. You *must* have noticed how she has avoided him ever since—a good sign, if Hythe would but think so!"

The countess really believed in the truth of her own words. She had set her heart on the match; and it speaks well for her sense of hospitality that she had abstained from pointedly evincing her displeasure at

the rejection that her son had experienced. But she consoled herself by the reflection, that Flavia was very young, and, of course, ignorant of her own mind, while pre-engaged affections were happily, in this case, not to be dreaded. Except a priest or two, and that snuffy old French doctor of whom the young lady often spoke, the countess was convinced that her young relative had never in her life been in company with an unmarried man, before Lord Hythe burst like the day-star upon the narrow horizon of her brief experience.

Thus Lady Mortlake drove cheerily away from her hall-door, convinced that her youthful guest was already timidly regretting the coy "No" which Augustus had too easily accepted as an answer to his suit; and that plenty of time remained between the time present and the re-opening of parliament wherein to bring the course of true love into a channel of satis-

factory smoothness. The road was an excellent one, thanks to the late earl's care for the amelioration of the property, and the four bays whirled along the light carriage at a brisk pace. But the keeper's cottage was at some distance from the great house, and hills had to be scaled, and tracts of woodland to be traversed, before the goal was reached. The arrival had been happily timed; and the barouche rolled swiftly across the elastic turf, and halted before the door of the thatched lodge just as the shooting ponies were being brought round, as the spaniels were yelping forth their eagerness for a renewal of the campaign, and as the sportsmen were emerging, gun in hand, from the dwelling of the prime-minister of Lord Mortlake's preserves.

For some time the countess and her well-grown daughters had enough to do in responding to the greetings of their friends,

who, having had a good morning's sport, and the best possible luncheon to appease the appetite produced by fresh air and exercise, were in temper and spirits of corresponding excellence. Indeed, the pleasant hours spent under the greenwood bough, aided by the charms of good-cheer, good-fellowship, and unlimited "cup," had thawed the frost that incases an Englishman's real nature; and even the young squires found themselves conversing with the fair occupants of the barouche with an ease that astonished themselves. But besides the local aristocrats, besides young Sir Neville and old Sir John, and the brothers Plummington from Plummington Grange, and Mr Fosdyke of Fosdyke, with his three sons, and one or two other Anglo-Saxon thanes, the like of whom are only to be found in such out-of-the-way shires as that whereof Harbledown was an ornament, there were other and more fasci-

nating cavaliers present; these were no others than Lord Plantagenet Vere and Captain Fitzalaric of the Lifeguards, about the most dangerous lady-killers in London, and now on a visit to Sir Neville Beecham at Manley Court.

As for Sir Neville himself, a pink-faced, flaxen-headed young man, who might at any time have changed clothes with his own groom, and defied recognition as a gentleman, there was nothing dangerous about him. He had nine thousand a year, an empty head, an honest heart, and a misplaced affection for short amber-coloured pipes and the strongest Cavendish tobacco. But the Guardsmen—for Lord Plantagenet was in the Foot Guards, as his inseparable companion was in the Household Cavalry—were really formidable persons, with such black moustaches; such embroidered shirt-fronts and “lovely” waistcoats, and charms, and trinkets; such eyes, and hair, and

neck-ties; such beautifully white teeth, killing-glances, soft smiles, and stocks of small-talk, as might well strike terror to the heart of any mother in Belgravia. These dreadful young men could sing, ride, waltz, and flirt so very much better than any eldest son worth mentioning; they had such an artful power of being pensive or rattlingly merry, according to taste; and were so well provided with the most delightful riddles, new croquet rules, new forfeits, new scraps of Belgravian slang, that no heiress was safe from them. As for those numerous fair ones whose faces were their fortunes, judicious chaperones were as much fluttered at the sight of Vere and Fitzalaric in contiguity to the bright bevy of white-robed innocents under their charge, as a hen that sees the shadow of the hovering hawk fall upon her chicks. They were shocking social sharks, were Plantagenet Vere and Alured Fitzalaric,

and for a few minutes Lady Mortlake could hardly manage to return their civil speeches in kind.

Why had the earl asked them, she wondered. Ah! to be sure, they were staying with that boorish young baronet, whose forefathers had always kept up a sort of hereditary friendship with the Clares; but still Lady Mortlake wished the dandies away. Not that she feared for the peace of mind of her own daughters; Lady Julia and Lady Caroline were case-hardened in the fire of London life, and could not easily be dazzled now; besides, they were not rich, and it was certain that the too attractive Guardsmen could not marry, according to Mayfair ethics, until they should find wives able to maintain them for the rest of their natural lives. But Lady Flavia! the countess could have shed tears at the idea that "that dear lamb" should be exposed to encounter two such elegant wolves as the

graceful gentlemen in the knickerbockers and velvet coats, to whom she was now forcing herself to say something civil; for she had a horrid idea that Lord Hythe's courtship would scarcely be furthered by the arrival on the scene of these inopportune exquisites; and it was not until after mature reflection that she regained her serene confidence that her own son's sterling merits must eventually be recognised. Lord Hythe's voice broke in upon her reverie: "Where is Flavia?" He asked this question with some little concern, and the lady-killers themselves pricked up their ears like an old hunting horse that hears the cry of the far-distant pack. They, too, had heard vague rumours of something very strange, very beautiful, and very wealthy domiciled beneath the earl's roof. The earl, too, chimed in with the inquiry after his favourite, for every one liked Lady Flavia. That young lady's

absence was accounted for on the ground of headache, a plea devised on the spur of the moment by the countess, in whose opinion any excuse sounded better than an acknowledgment that caprice was the cause of the non-appearance of her lovely ward.

"And, by the by," said Lady Caroline suddenly, "I was so near forgetting the dear child's commission. Augustus, would you call the keeper?—Haynes, I mean. He has gone forward with the beaters."

Big Ben, whose towering figure was to be seen fifty yards off, presiding over a group of boys and farming-men, was summoned to the side of the barouche, and fingered his battered hat in token of deference. The keeper did not look wholly comfortable at being thus suddenly called up; perhaps his unquiet conscience made a coward of him; at any rate, his restless eye glanced stealthily from face to face, as if to read the signs of any hostile

feeling that unlucky revelations might have conjured up; but none such were visible.

"Isn't there a heronry on what they call the Isle, down by the river, on the Chartley Road?" asked Lady Caroline.

"Yes, my lady," said Big Ben, again doing violence to his hat-brim.

"Then," said Lady Caroline, "perhaps you could manage to get my cousin, Lady Flavia Clare——Dear me!" And the comely speaker broke off in some surprise, for at the mention of that name Big Ben had given a start of dismay, and had let the gun under his arm fall with a crash. But the keeper begged pardon, explaining that he had fancied that he heard a dog yelp, just then, in the woods, and feared somebody was disturbing the game; and the earl being by this time very eager to get back to the covert, and make the most of the daylight remaining, the ladies alighted

from the barouche, and walked a few hundred yards under escort towards the scene of action; Lady Caroline briefly imparting to Mr. Haynes that her cousin had a fancy for some of the long glossy heron's plumes, and that she wished to speak to the keeper himself on the subject of procuring them. And then the whole party adjourned to the copse, where presently the short armistice came to an end, and nothing was heard but the crashing of brushwood under the beaters' tread, the whirring of pheasants, the crack of guns, and the various cries of "Down charge," "Seek dead," and so forth, as the spaniels rushed through the thickets to secure the fallen birds.

But though Mr. Benjamin Hayes was useful and active, his thoughts were not wholly of pheasants and breech-loaders. He knit his shaggy brows as he went sturdily about his work; and when the

battue was over, and the sportsmen gone, Big Ben, to the surprise of his underlings, chose himself to drive the cart that conveyed the dead game up to the great house.

"A nod," muttered the shaggy-headed forester, as he jerked the reins and plied the whip, "is as good as a wink to a blind horse. But Ben Haynes ain't blind. Wonder what she's up to now!" For that the young lady who occupied the largest place in his thoughts just then, was "up" to something more than immediately met the eye, was a conclusion readily formed by the naturally shrewd mind of the earl's unfaithful head-keeper. Arrived at the great house, Mr. Haynes contrived to get speech of Simmons, and begged that waiting damsel to tell her lady that he, Haynes the keeper, was there by her ladyship's directions, to receive his orders about the heron's feathers. Simmons took the message, and brought back word that Haynes was to

wait. The dressing-bell, indeed, had just rung, but Lady Flavia would see the keeper for an instant before dinner.

After a while, Big Ben, very uncomfortable at the proximity of so much splendour, was smuggled like contraband goods up the back-stairs, along the grand gallery, up the corridor to the left, and so into the western wing, and into the pink boudoir that formed part of Lady Flavia's suite of apartments. There was Lady Flavia herself, ready dressed for the dinner-party, in what appeared to the keeper's bewildered eyes as fleecy clouds of gauzy whiteness, very soft and gossamer-like, with pearls clasping her slender wrists, pearls wreathing her graceful neck, pearls twisted in her raven hair—not an atom of colour in her dress—all white, pure and virginal as a snow-wreath. Big Ben stood, hat in hand, ducking his rough head, and awaiting her commands.

Simmons, whose innate curiosity was sharpened by the fact of her being in the service of a mistress whose genuine character was aggravatingly difficult of comprehension, did her best to play the eaves-dropper, but in vain. She fluttered about near the pink boudoir, going in and out of the bedroom, and the bath-room, and the dressing-room, and up and down the passage, but never daring to apply her ear to the keyhole, or to pause near the door, lest her lady, of whose quickness of perception she had a very high opinion, should detect her presence by some abnormal power of seeing or hearing. All the waiting-woman could distinguish was the faint sound of a girlish voice, very sweet and clear, that ran on like the music of far-off harp-strings, and an occasional growl like that of a bear—such a growl as Orson might have uttered in the first stages of his education by Valentine; and at last a little silver bell tinkled

out its bidding, and Simmons showed Big Ben down-stairs again.

That evening Lady Flavia was in very high spirits, and her loveliness and her sprightly infantine merriment turned the heads of the company gathered around Lord Mortlake's table. Even the London men, who had seen so much beauty, so many bright-eyed *ingénues* were honestly fascinated for once, and forgot their own hackneyed round of accomplishments, to become the very humble courtiers of this peerless fairy queen. As for Lord Hythe he had never admired her so much before; he drank in deep draughts of love as the hours went by; and even dull Sir Neville stood entranced as she sang—simple little French pastoral ballads, that she had learned, she said, at Grèsnez-les-cloches—though he neither cared for music, nor
ew a syllable of any foreign tongue.
Then the countess, for the first time, saw

that her husband's ward, once launched in London society, would become a leader as of right, and seeing this, was more bent than ever on hailing as a daughter-in-law one so well fitted in every way to be Lord Hythe's wife.

But Big Ben, the keeper, going his rounds, and posting the watchers, was meantime growling to himself: "I'll do it. I've promised her, and she'll hold me to my word, or my name is not Haynes. I'll do it! and yet it's an ugly job—a hanging touch, I reckon. But she warn't one to say nay to; and it's sure to be laid on some one else, or at worst, 'tis only a mistake; and a hundred pounds is a mort o' money. 'How do you know he's not a poacher? and if he resists, why, you have the law on your side;' them was her very words. And she *has* a head-piece, she has!" concluded the keeper, with a sort of stupid enthusiasm, and said no more for the time. But his

sleep was troubled on that night, and he muttered queer things, that his poor, spirit-broken wife quaked to hear, about golden money, and the red life-blood of murdered men.

CHAPTER XIV.

SENTENCE OF DEATH.

SENTENCE of Death!—a grim, black, ugly name for a grim, black, ugly thing. We keep it in the arsenal of justice still, that grisly old scarecrow, that barbarous uncouth idol, *in terrorem* of evildoers. But we do our best to keep the gory Juggernaut from the light of day, and only now and then drag forth the ill-omened car to crush out a guilty life beneath its cruel wheels. We have almost outgrown the faith of our fathers in that old British palladium, the gallows. We keep our judicial Minotaur yet, but its hungry maw is nourished with half-rations; and we are not very proud of the blood-red

blot that is but partly erased from our statute-book.

Sentence of Death! It has a harsh, hard sound, even when it is solemnly pronounced by the ermine-robed judge, whose voice is weighted with all the might and majesty of authority. In such a case, be sure the trial has been full and fair. The evidence has been sharply tested; the smallest loop-hole by which the light of truth might shine in and show the prisoner innocent, has been scrupulously left clear. All the leanings of the Court have been towards mercy. The Argus eyes of the press have been spying about in every conceivable nook and corner for whatever might disprove or extenuate the crime. There has been almost a weakness, almost a superstition, in the sensitive desire shown that the accused wretch should have every chance of safety. Even when the evidence was hammered home, point after point, like nails knocked into a coffin,

the very counsel for the Crown shrank from his task, and did his office with studied quietude and self-restraint. The jury long debated, yearning, some of them, to shut their eyes to truth, in favour of a questionable mercy; and when the reluctant verdict was given, the judge—himself an old man, perhaps, and not long for this world—feels his eyes grow dim, and his voice tremble, as he bids the culprit, whom he has tried so kindly and so patiently, prepare to give up a life for a life, and speaks the last and direst sentence of the offended law.

But Sentence of Death lightly, laughingly spoken, yet in bitter truth; Sentence of Death spoken by the sweet fresh voice of a young girl, as she chirrup gaily to her bounding ponies, and makes the lash whistle around their ears—that is surely more terrible than any doom pronounced in any court of justice, were it at the judgment-seat of Jeffreys himself! There was no appeal.

there. No Home Secretary could feel doubts, and stay execution; no petitioners for mercy could beset the Fountain of Grace; no newspaper press could bring the artillery of a thousand leading articles to bear upon the scaffold, that undue severity had built up, not for an innocent sufferer, but for one not wholly worthy of the strangling cord. Even the condemned did not know how close to his elbow were the scythe and hour-glass, and had no time given for repentance; yet the fiat went forth that a man must die.

Now back to Harbledown, the seat, as Burke and his brother-historians described it, of the Right Honourable the Earl of Mortlake; which stately mansion, from the day of the pheasant-shooting at Tinningley Copse, had been rapidly changing from the condition of dull magnificence that had seemed normal to it, to the genial state of a great country-house belonging to an owner

who has ample means and marriageable daughters. Before the day of the battue, the earl and countess had somewhat sparingly accepted the rare hospitalities of their neighbours; but now they began to entertain, and that with a frequency unusual in the provinces; while fresh dinners in various houses of greater or less pretension sprang, like gastronomic phoenixes, from the ashes of banquets given at Harbledown. It was just what the earl liked. He shared the tastes of his contemporaries, and was fond of good eating and drinking, of whist, and of such conversation as can exist when fat oxen are the theme. He really was a good farmer, and had a blameless love for talking about the details of farming. The countess was only in part a lady of fashion, according to the common meaning of the term. She held that there was a time for all things. In the country, she talked of schools, penny-clubs, clergymen, teachers,

flannel, children, soup, and old women. In London, she talked about "people." She was very well pleased to extend her acquaintance.

It seemed, in fact, that the change from comparative solitude to such gaiety as a country neighbourhood can supply, was pleasing to everybody. To Lord Hythe, because he had some idea of divorcing himself from the humble and faithful borough of Starvington, as Napoleon did from Josephine, and wooing a parliamentary Maria Louisa in the shape of the county representation. There was only one other house in the shire, a house of ducal rank, that could vie in grandeur with that of Clare; and it had formerly been an understood thing that the county should be represented in the House of Commons by the eldest sons of both noble families. Lord Arthur Glendower was already one of the members. Why should not Mr. Hoopsley,

the tremendous brewer, who represented his own malt-kilns and mash-tubs rather than anything or anybody else in the district, and who had bought his seat as he would an opera-stall, be ousted in favour of so sound a politician as Augustus, Lord Hythe? The spread of the Mortlake influence, therefore, was welcome to the future candidate; and as for his sisters, they were exactly the sort of healthy, placid, young women who see no hardship in a ten-mile drive along a muddy road, for the blissful purpose of sitting for two mortal hours and a half between a deaf old squire and a stiff old dean, both very noisy over their soup, very monosyllabic of speech, and very dry of manner. But that Lady Flavia should have derived genuine pleasure from such heavy entertainments was, at first sight, not quite so intelligible.

But she did. She was always bright and gay as a little bird warbling out its joyous

tiny heart in musical trilling on a summer day. Boredom tried in vain to cast its dark shadow upon her ; she was not to be bored, not even by the most immature of young curates, with colds in their heads, and a rabid terror of speaking elsewhere than in the pulpit. The curates could talk to her. She drew them out by a sort of imperceptible traction, and loosened their stammering tongues, as they had not been loosened since their proprietors left college. The proud old dons from the cathedral city of Slochester, Brahmin of their cloth, unbent in the radiance of her smile, and quoted Latin poetry in describing her, afterwards, to other Brahmin. The squires hoped that she would come and see the hounds throw off, and suggested lawn meets for her express gratification. The squireesses, whose true-blue Protestantism had been a little shocked, at first, at the idea of welcoming a girl bred in a convent, and therefore,

perhaps, a she-Jesuit, dangerous to English households, felt their motherly hearts warm to the orphan child. Everybody agreed, tacitly, to treat her as something between a spoiled child and a princess; a fair, gifted, glorious thing, on whom the very winds had no business to blow too roughly.

The Guardsmen paid Lady Flavia Clare a good deal of attention; but the countess, to her great relief, saw no cause for entertaining a jealousy towards them on her son's behalf. The illustrious exiles from Mayfair could not, with all their lures, and calls, and well-proved stratagems, entrap that bright-plumaged young bird, for whose enslavement they limed the twig, and spread the net. It was to no purpose that Fitzalaric's dark glance, full of pensive sadness, followed the heiress as she moved, fawnlike, about the lighted room. It was in vain for Vere to twirl his moustache till it had the true Bobadil twist, and to talk his very best

about the Nile, and the Schreckhorn, and his slipping down the crevasse, and his scuffle with Arab thieves beside the Dead Sea. Grave or gay, chattering or mute, those gallant youths could get nothing but sprightly talk and sunny smiles from Lady Flavia, but no sign of preference for either. Her little heart was proof against those professed lady-killers; and they acknowledged, with some pique, that the "little party, old Mortlake's ward," was not easily to be won, and predicted that she would make a sensation in London.

"You can't chaff her, as you can most girls," said Lord Plantagenet to his Damon, Fitzalaric; "and the sentimental dodge won't do at all. But nothing so pretty, and nothing so clever, will be out next season, Fitz, my boy."

To which Fitz made answer, that the "little party" was worthy of his friend's praise, adding: "Those Mortlake girls look

like cart-horses beside a thoroughbred, when she's in the room. But I'll tell you what it is, Planty—I don't fancy that way she has of laughing; it makes a fellow feel doosed uncomfortable. There's something wicked and hard in the sound of it; haven't you remarked it?"

But Lord Plantagenet's ear was less finely attuned than his comrade's, and he had noticed nothing very particular in the laugh in question.

One Saturday night, quite at the end of the month, the Harbledown party returned from dining at the bishop's palace. The carriages had rolled away round to the stable-yard, and the newly-returned inmates of the house had already taken up their flat candlesticks, and were wishing each other a good-night, when Lord Mortlake, who had picked up the county paper, that day published, exclaimed: "Eh, eh! What's this? I wonder we didn't hear of this in Slochester.

The editor calls it murder." Everybody looked eagerly round. Murder is a word that none, since all have a life to lose, can hear unmoved. The earl hastily skimmed the cream of the paragraph, headed in big black capitals, which had caught his eye. "There are not many details," he said; "because it seems the news only came just as they were going to press with the paper; but "we" have sent a special reporter to the scene of action, and we promise further and full information in an extra edition. All that is known is, that a gentleman has been picked up, in a dying state, in a lane near Chartley Parva, having been shot by somebody, though apparently not for purposes of plunder, as his watch and purse were untouched. Eh! what's all this? *Nag's Head Inn*—name of the unfortunate sufferer understood to be Royston—not expected to survive—no trace of the assassin—police on the track—of course. Ah!

that will be some work for Mr. Fosdyke. He is an active magistrate, and the murder took place on his land."

"Royston!" exclaimed the countess. "Surely no relation to the Mr. Royston you knew in France, Flavia, dear; and who so kindly——"

"Hardly!" said Lady Flavia, turning her beautiful face and limpid eyes towards the countess—"hardly. I believe Mr. Royston had no near relations. He had a son; but he, I think, is in India, with his regiment."

She said this very calmly and truthfully, and the hand that held the candle was as steady as a rock. Her cheek was a little pale, but it was natural that she should betray some token of emotion at the sudden intelligence that violence and death had been busy so near her.

"Ah! well I'm glad of that," said the earl heartily. "I'm glad it's not a member

of your friend's family. Poor fellow! I wonder who he was. Some artist, perhaps. They often stay at Chartley to sketch, as the dean told me the other day."

CHAPTER XV.

THE HERON'S FEATHERS.

"GEE up, then ; gee up, horse !" cried the wagoner, without the remotest suspicion that he was addressing his team in corrupted Hindustani, and then, as the talismanic "gee" produced no effect, he added the words : "Ar-woot ! c'mither, woot !" cracking his whip the while. The leading horse, however, a more sensible animal than his driver, planted his broad fore-feet firmly on the road, and refused to budge an inch ; but stood snorting and jangling his bells—the bells that in conjunction with flaunting tassels, and brass plates, and red fringe, ornamented the gay wagon harness.

"What ails old Dobbin?" asked Roger the wagoner, exceedingly puzzled, and not at all sure of what his next move ought to be; for wagoners proper, who live with their horses, carry their whips more for display than for use, and manage their four-footed subordinates much more by appealing to their better feelings and sense of propriety than by hard blows, such as town-bred carters too often resort to in default of the true language of the Houhynymys. "What ails old Dobbin?" therefore said Roger. "Look, Bill, if there's a sack in the road."

Bill, the wagoner's "mate," came tumbling down from among the mountainous corn-sacks with which the blue wain, now on its way from Broomhead Farm to Slochester market, was piled. Bill was half asleep; but he roused himself up by digging his red knuckles into his drowsy eyes, and ran forward.

"A sack wouldn't frighten he," said Bill,

with more truth than grammar, for indeed Dobbin was a valuable old draught-horse, and did not take fright at trifles. The cause of his present obstinacy was soon discovered.

"Hulloa ! here's a chap lying right across the road. One bit more, and we'd ha' run over him," cried Bill ; and Roger, unhooking the little lantern with which early wagoners are generally provided, came forward to reconnoitre the recumbent human figure that lay so motionless in the lane.

"He have had a drop, most like," remarked Bill, with a grin, for, in his simple philosophy, the drugged beer of the public-house could alone have furnished a valid pretext for the choice of so perilous a place of repose. But the wagoner's eyes were keener, and he dropped on one knee, close to the prostrate form, earnestly exclaiming : "Hold your tongue, you fool. Don't ye see the blood upon him ? 'Tis a murdered

man!" And so, to the horrified eyes of the two farming-men, did the helpless figure on the ground appear to be. It was very dark, what with fog and the grey, uncertain light of the raw morning, and the little lantern threw a yellow gleam on the prostrate form that lay so fearfully still, and on a pool of half-dried blood, in which stood the iron-shod hoofs of the fore-horse.

"He's dead, for sure!" said Bill; but Roger had touched the stranger's shoulder, and he stirred feebly, and groaned, thereby proving that some life still lingered in the poor shattered form. But he was very badly hurt, that was certain. His right arm, and side, and shoulder, were stiff with clotted blood, and his coat-sleeve was ragged with shot-holes and singed by fire. The faint smell of burnt wool was still perceptible, proving that the gun that brought the victim down had been discharged with its muzzle almost touching its mark. They

lifted his heavy head, and spoke to him with surprising gentleness for so rough a pair; but got no answer. There was no glance of intelligence in the half-closed eyes, and no sound, save a low moan, came from the pale lips. It was a very handsome face, despite its ghastly pallor, and the crow's feet that reckless dissipation had begun to paint around the eyes—a face set off by chestnut curls of hair, and by long tawny moustaches. A gentleman's face even in its degradation.

“An accident!” was Bill's verdict; “his gun went off, most likely.”

But his superior, the wagoner, more shrewdly held to his own opinion, bidding Bill remark that no gun was to be seen, and that the unfortunate person, whoever he might be, was not accoutred for sporting of any sort. The men held a brief debate, and finally decided that the best course to pursue would be to take on with them this

unknown sufferer as far as the *Nag's Head*, at Chartley, which was on their road, and but two miles off, and there deposit him. Accordingly, though with some trouble and delay, the corn-sacks were sufficiently shifted to enable Roger and Bill to lay the passive form of the wounded man in the wagon; and off they set for the high-road, every jolt eliciting a groan from the sufferer. The two miles seemed terribly long; but at last the blue wagon came to a halt before the *Nag's Head*, and these good Samaritans in smock-frocks, Roger and Bill, knocked and shouted till they aroused the sleeping household from their slumbers. Great was the perturbation of the landlord and landlady at having a dead or dying gentleman brought to their door in the cold grey light of dawn, and loud were their exclamations when they recognised in the wounded man their truant guest, Captain Royston.

The captain had gone out rather late on the previous evening, and had not returned ; but his absence had caused no particular alarm. Basil Royston was one of that numerous class who can put up with any company but that of their own solitary thoughts. He had found friends in and around Chartley, as any man may do anywhere on the one condition of distributing eleemosynary liquor to an admiring tap-room circle ; and his evenings had of late been spent in the society of sundry village Lovelaces and wild apprentices from Chartley, who endured his boastful talk and arrogant patronage for the sake of his superior rank and unlimited capacity for standing treat.

And now the luckless captain had been brought back sorely wounded, dying most likely, and there was nothing to do but to put him to bed, with all despatch to send for Dr. Sankey, and to bind up his wounds,

the hemorrhage from which, however, had nearly ceased, or Basil Royston must have bled to death before the medical man's arrival at his bedside. Mr. Sankey, a hard-working general practitioner, who lost thirty pounds a year in drugs and port wine by his appointment of workhouse surgeon, and on whom the popular voice had conferred the degree of M.D., soon came cantering from Appleby, Churchtown, and gave his best skill and care to the task before him. The patient was still all but insensible, and the diagnosis had to proceed without any aid from him. It appeared that a heavy charge of shot had lodged in the sufferer's arm, side, and shoulder, by far the larger proportion of the leaden pellets remaining in the shoulder. There had been great loss of blood; but no artery seemed to be injured, nor, apparently, were the lungs wounded, though the discharge had been so close that the

flash from the gun had set the wounded man's clothes on fire. The attack could hardly have been committed with a view to robbery, for Basil Royston's watch and trinkets, his rings, and his purse, containing many gold pieces, were still in his possession.

"Will he die, doctor?" asked Mrs. Robins the landlady, following the surgeon to the door as he withdrew. But Mr. Sankey was true to the etiquette of the profession, so he merely shook his head, and said that the wounds might prove fatal, certainly; but, on the other hand, science might avail to preserve the patient; after which Delphic response the oracle rode away.

"If he lives, he'll have had a squeak for his life; that's all *I* know about it," remarked the surgeon in confidence to himself, as he trotted home to breakfast. "I wonder who did it. Most likely some

jealous young clodhopper of poaching proclivities. From all I can hear, the gallant captain has a turn for playing the part of Lothario; and our west-country folks are hardly civilized enough to appreciate the character."

Then Mr. Sankey, between breakfast and his next visit to his patient, penned a little paragraph for the *County Chronicle*, of which he was an occasional correspondent, and sent it in by the guard of the Honeycombe coach. It was a piece of news that would be welcome to the editor, he was sure, since local news is seldom of a very engrossing character; and it was a capital advertisement for himself, Job Sankey, M.R.C.S.

The *County Chronicle* snapped at the bait as a starving pike at a gudgeon, promised an extra edition, and packed off a special reporter, in the shape of the editor's nephew, to Chartley Parva. But the

special reporter found it more difficult to fill his note-book than he had anticipated, for the affair seemed wrapped in mystery. The wounded man was not dead; nay, he was decidedly better, and could answer, in a faint whisper—the mere ghost of his old voice—such few questions as Mr. Fosdyke, the magistrate, wished to ask, and as Mr. Sankey permitted. But it soon became apparent that the wounded man could throw no light upon the matter. He had not seen his assailant. He was walking home, between twelve and one o'clock, down the lane, between the thick woods, when he suddenly saw a flash that half-blinded him, and felt a blow, and then a numbing sensation of pain, that merged itself into a deathly chill and faintness; and his next recollection was of being in bed at the *Nag's Head*, with the doctor and nurse beside him.

The county constabulary did their best,

searching the woods, groping about the hedgerows, and badgering with questions every man, woman, and child who pretended to the slightest hearsay knowledge of the tragical event. But no trace of the assassin could be found ; and a theory to the effect that the unfortunate gentleman had been shot by mistake for somebody else became prevalent. The special reporter could only take home the tidings that under the skilful hands of that eminent practitioner, Job Sankey, Esq., the patient was likely to recover, unless some relapse should ensue ; that the gentleman's name was Captain Royston ; and that he had for several days resided at the *Nag's Head Inn*. Only that, and one thing more ; that circumstance was, that not long since a young lady of great beauty, a resident under Lord Mortlake's roof, and a near relative of that nobleman, had visited Captain Royston at his inn, and that high

words, the precise purport of which were unintelligible to her unsophisticated ears, had on that occasion been overheard by Betty, chambermaid. But this piece of information never came before the provincial public at all.

The proprietor of the *County Chronicle*, a rich corn-factor, who lived in a villa just outside Slochester, was, as it so chanced, a tenant of Lord Mortlake's, and had strong hopes of inducing the earl to consent to his purchasing his leasehold dwelling, on the gardens of which he had spent much money. Also the new branch railway, the Honeycombe, Chartley, and Slochester line, of which nascent undertaking Lord Hythe was chairman, gave its advertisements to the *Chronicle*. The authorities of that journal were unwilling to print anything that might give umbrage at Harbledown, and they rightly conjectured that Lord Mortlake would not be pleased if

Lady Flavia's name were dragged into a newspaper report of an attempted murder ; wherefore no word of that young lady's visit to the *Nag's Head* was suffered to see daylight in the loyal columns of the *County Chronicle* ; and the *County Gazette*, the opposition paper, which would joyfully have turned the lantern of Diogenes on Harbledown and all its indwellers, most fortunately sent no special agent to the scene of action, and never acquired an inkling of any connection between the disreputable captain and the house of Clare.

On the Monday, at the very time when the special reporter of the *County Chronicle* was getting into his gig to return to headquarters with the meagre stock of information that he had been able to extract from the hangers-on of the inn and the puzzled police, who felt personally aggrieved at having nobody to take into custody, Big Ben presented himself at the great house.

He did not come empty-handed, for he carried a bunch of long glossy feathers, dangling from a button-hole of his stained velveteen coat. He came, he said, by Lady Flavia's orders, and Simmons presently conducted him to the pink room, where her young mistress was writing. Big Ben ducked his head, scraped the Aubusson carpet with his nailed boot, and presented his trophies. "Sorry, my lady," he said with the worst possible grace, "that I warn't able to get more feathers, as you desired. The birds have most died off, for no one has cared for the herons in my time, nor yet my father's; and I had to wait and wait till I thought I'd never get a shot."

As Mr. Benjamin Haynes excused himself thus, his eyes roved hither and thither, glancing at the carpet, the walls, the ceiling, or at Simmons, but never at Lady Flavia. The waiting-maid was yet in the room, in consequence of an order to remain, couched

in the words : " Don't go, Simmons," spoken with charming ease and simplicity. Lady Flavia took up the long delicate plumes, and examined them curiously. " These, then, are really heron's feathers," she murmured gently. " I always had a wish to see some of those tall plumes that our ancestors prized so much, and that princes and great barons were proud to wear. But there were no mail-packets coming in then from Africa and South America, bringing monthly consignments of ostrich and marabou plumes. There is a fashion even in feathers."

She was leaning her graceful head upon the hand with which she had been writing, and to all appearance her thoughts were far away, lost in the mist of bygone centuries, and she had forgotten the presence of the others. Simmons was too well drilled to disturb her lady's reverie, and it was left for the tall keeper to break the silence by

uneasily changing the position of his feet, and stumbling over a low footstool in doing so. The Lady Flavia Clare looked up with a bright smile. "I need not detain you here any longer, Mr. Haynes," she said; "I have given you a great deal of trouble to gratify a whim of mine, and here"—as she spoke she opened an ivory portemonnaie, a ladylike toy that looked fit for nothing but the enclosing of small silver or gold five-franc pieces, and carelessly extracted from it a crumpled bit of bank-paper—"here is a little present from me to your wife and children. Never mind looking at it!" added the heiress with imperious playfulness, for the slow-witted gamekeeper had begun to unfold the precious slip of thin, tough, rustling paper. He checked himself, however, as if he had handled hot iron, made his bow and growl of acknowledgment, and was conducted down-stairs by Simmons; and it was not until Big Ben was deep among

the lonely woods that he ventured to draw out and examine the gift that he had received. It was a bank-note for a hundred pounds.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE HARBLEDOWN POSTBAG.

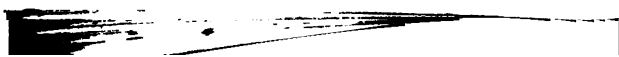
"It will very much depend on whom we get to keep the stalls," said Mrs. Dibbs, the bishop's wife; and old Miss Plummington, aunt to the Plummingtons of the Grange, nodded a cordial assent.

"To be sure it will," chimed in a stronger-minded spinster, Miss Billingsley, daughter of a former Dean of Slochester, and who, as having been born and bred in the precincts of the cathedral, where, indeed, her whole life had been spent, was regarded as a sort of feminine minor canon at the least. Miss Billingsley, who was the oldest of young ladies, or the youngest of old

ladies, lived in the Close still, with her poor deformed sister Maud, who had but one pleasure, the anthem; and she was deservedly respected, and a little feared. Even Mrs. Dibbs, a lady who did not lightly veil her crest in social contests, would by no means have cared to engage in hostilities with Miss Billingsley, who was not quarrelsome, but remarkably fearless and outspoken.

“To be sure it will,” said Miss Billingsley. “Nothing in the world depends so much upon management, and nothing, if ill managed, turns out so flat a failure, as a fancy fair. Don’t *you* think so, Lady Mortlake?” And Lady Mortlake, who made one of the council, smiled her acceptance of Miss Billingsley’s apothegm. This conversation, of which a fancy fair was the subject, took place in the great drawing-room of the bishop’s palace; and as the season was still very mild, most of the party had preferred to

establish themselves at some distance from the blazing fire, so that a circle of chairs and couches had been formed not far from the windows that overlooked the large and ancient garden, whose lawns had been rolled, whose trees had been trimmed, and whose beds had been made gay with flowers, for the pleasure of many successive tenants for life of the episcopal mitre and its snug revenues. That garden was beginning to assume but a faded and wintry appearance, for it was November now ; but still it had a pleasant look, and none the less pleasant that several merry children, young scions of the race of Dibbs, were playing noisily among the leafless trees and smooth walks, under the patronage of a very pretty young lady, whose coquettish little hat overshadowed a mass of soft curls, fine as silk, and black as night. She, Lady Flavia Clare, had not cared to stay in the grave circle of debating ladies.



“ You are too wise for me,” she had said in her own inimitable childish way. “ I shall go and make friends with the little people out there.” And to judge by the bursts of laughter, and by the eager way in which the little bishoplings crowded around their new acquaintance, Lady Flavia’s intention was being carried out in a satisfactory manner. But the talk inside the palace was earnest enough, and it was all about the fancy fair.

Slochester was stirred to its depths. The quiet, sleepy old place, that basked, in general, like an over-ripe pear, in the mellow sunshine of its cosy prosperity, was now awake, and its chief inhabitants were as busy as emmets whose nest had been trodden down. Only on one subject could Slochester folks have been thus excited, and that subject was the cathedral, their boast and glory, the pride of all, and the source of daily bread to many of

them. It is necessary to pass an apprenticeship of a few years in a cathedral town, before the feeling with which its indwellers regard the sacred fane that towers in their midst can be fully understood. They think of it by day, they dream of it by night, and are given to make disparaging comparisons between rival minsters and their own darling edifice, every stone of which they love with a personal affection. No nave like ours; no chancel so full of the glorious dust of saints and kings; no windows so rich in gules, azure, and gold; no bells so deep-toned; no organ so musical; no choristers so silver-voiced; no precentor so tasteful; no dean so learned and so good. Great is Diana of the Ephesians. Slochester was not backward in championing its venerable pile.

But the cathedral was in danger, not, indeed, of irreverent reforms introduced

by hateful parliamentary statutes, but of toppling down bodily on the heads of the worshippers. Time had gnawed at its buttresses and pinnacles with his customary impartiality ; and as the bells were ringing one Wednesday for service, there came a crash, and a roar, and a rattle of falling masonry ; and the horrified vergers ran up to find a ghastly gap in the chancel wall and roof, whence heaps of heavy stones, and lime, and decayed wood had thundered down, crushing the sculptured effigies of Bishop Crump and St. Mungo, shattering the precious panes of the memorial window put up by Dean Yellowboys, 1611 A.D., and burying the carved tombs and brasses, and the noble old altar itself, under four or five feet of rubble and dust. Worse still, the great architect who came hurrying from London to direct the restorations, decided that the central tower and the transept were in a very precarious state. The

tower must be under-pinned, the roof strengthened; fresh props, fresh buttresses were needed, unless the colossal building were intended to fall to ruin. These repairs would be costly; and the funds at the disposal of the dean and chapter were not equal to the estimated expense.

In this emergency, the bright idea of a fancy fair suggested itself to some inventive female mind, and the proposition was taken up with enthusiasm. Fancy fairs often produce a great deal of money, and those shy capitalists who would recoil from the naked horror of a subscription list, like fish from a bare hook, are not always averse to buy guinea nothings and five-guinea trifles, when there is a good band of music, a decorated tent, and, above all, when the shopwoman of the hour is an attractive girl of the highest lineage procurable. This last, in the present case, was the difficulty. Contributors of elegant

inutilities were as plenty as blackberries; good stall-keepers were rare.

And there was another reason why Mrs. Dibbs was peculiarly anxious to net great profits from the charitable, one of those reasons which perpetually occur to complicate the machinery of human action. Mrs. Dibbs, who had naturally taken one-half of the stalls under the shelter of her matronly wing, was jealous of the dean, and of Sophronia his wife, and wanted to eclipse their good works.

Was there ever a dean, I wonder, who got on quite well with his bishop? Not at Slochester, at any rate. In that ecclesiastical city, the dean and the bishop were looked upon as the white and black kings at chess, as fire and water, as the First Lord of her Majesty's Treasury and the leader of her Majesty's Opposition. The dean, within the precincts, was by far the more popular. All the canons, the preben-

daries, the precentor, everyone who ate the cathedral's bread and drank the cathedral's port, stuck to the dean in fair weather and foul. But the secular clergy, the incumbents of the town churches, the country vicars, the rural deans, adhered to the bishop with equal zeal. There was much debatable ground in the shape of power between those two churchmen. There was chronic though mild war between palace and deanery.

Mrs. Dibbs had not been very long at the palace, but she was as zealous in the feud as if she had been born within hearing of the great bell of Slochester. She was not a humble woman ; indeed, though a good soul in the main, she was of a pugnacious and self-asserting turn ; but we ought to deal gently with the wives of bishops, remembering that the world deals harshly with them. It must be very hard, certainly, to live in a palace, and have for

one's husband a spiritual peer of this realm, and mix with the great of the earth, yet be Mrs. Dibbs still—plain Mrs. Dibbs, as the washerwoman is plain Mrs. Brown. If society, refusing to say “My lady” where the husband is called “My lord,” would only be considerate enough to address its notes, its bills, circulars, and so forth, to the Right Reverend Mrs. Dibbs, that would be something. But no; the wife of a bishop's bosom is unrecognised by the Herald's College. None the less, however, did Mrs. Dibbs defend her right of professional superiority. In this matter of the repairs, his lordship had given five hundred pounds—no small slice out of his nominal five thousand, and he had winced as he signed the cheque—but the dean out of his savings had given as much, and had got twice as much credit for his liberality. It was the more necessary to outshine the enemy on the occasion of the fancy fair, and for this

purpose Mrs. Dibbs had reckoned on her kind new friend, Lady Mortlake.

If the Ladies Caroline and Julia would be so good as to condescend to stand behind the counter for two or three hours, surely all would go well. They were fine comely young women—thus ran the thoughts of the lady of the palace—but their main merit was in their rank. Over their stalls, metaphorically speaking, would float the banner of all the Clares, the field gules and the falcon armed and plumaged or, that had figured gallantly on shield and knightly pennon in the old wars of the Edwards and Henries. There was only one house in the county fit to vie with Harbledown. The spending public of Slochester and its vicinity would make liberal purchases when the sellers were an earl's daughters.

But to the infinite chagrin of Mrs. Dibbs, the Ladies Caroline and Julia said No, and

no amount of pressing could make them say Yes. It was not in their line, they said. The style of thing suited some people, but they had tried it; and not even to restore the Yellowboys' window, not even to mend St. Mungo, or the Crump effigy, or even to repair the central tower, would they do it again. In truth the Ladies Caroline and Julia were not fit for work of that sort. They were kind creatures; not lazy, not haughty. They were heartily willing to help the good cause. Julia was hard at work on a large screen, Caroline was painting a pair of fans. Both sisters had spent a large part of their allowance in purchasing fancy articles for the fair. But they would not keep stalls. Tiresome men, they declared, expected stall-keepers to have wit and repartee at command, to keep up a constant fire of crackling jokes, and to smile incessantly at every coxcomb who might affect to cheapen a penwiper. It

was as cruel a tax on the mind as the acting of charades. It was a bore. The Ladies Caroline and Julia said No, and the countess did not attempt to make them say anything else.

"What on earth are we to do?" asked rueful Mrs. Dibbs.

"You will take a stall yourself," said the Countess of Mortlake.

Yes, Mrs. Dibbs would take a stall herself; but though she was sure of absorbing the enforced half-crowns of a great many curates, and the sovereigns of many rectors, it would never do to trust to one successful stall alone. And Miss Billingsley shook her head laughingly at the suggestion that she should preside over a counter; declaring with great good-humour that her ugly face would frighten people away, though she could do some service as a whipper-in. But saleswomen must be had.

"There's Mrs. Bangham," was the first suggestion.

"Odious creature! I wonder she has the impudence to show her face in such a place for such a purpose; but I understand she belongs to the deanery half of the fair already," austere remarked Mrs. Dibbs.

"There's Mrs. Faddleton, a very pretty woman," said Miss Plummington.

And though Mrs. Dibbs made a wry face at the name of Mrs. Captain Faddleton, wife of a raffish ex-officer of the Hussars, and whose ponies, and French finery, and French manners somewhat scandalised Slochester, it was agreed that fair-haired little Mrs. Faddleton should have the offer of a stall.

"The countess," suggested Miss Compton.

"I have asked her," was the reply of Mrs. Dibbs; "but Lady Compton won't let her keep a stall."

Two ladies who had not yet spoken now brought forward their candidates : "There's Miss Cooper."

"She is laid up with influenza, and besides, she's such a fright, poor dear," returned the bishop's wife.

"There's Blanche Pender," was the next suggestion.

"Yes, but she's so silly. She would mis-call everything, and very likely give sovereigns in change by mistake for shillings. But there's the cake-stall, to be sure : yes, I think even Blanche might attend to that," said Mrs. Dibbs thoughtfully. And it was settled that Miss Blanche Pender's intellect was capable of grasping the distinction between raspberry-jam puffs and cherry-brandy. Then came a quick fire of question and answer.

"Miss Watkins—Emma, I mean, not the eldest?"

"A country banker's daughter, my dear,

and niece to Pluckley the veterinary surgeon! That would never, never do!" and Mrs. Dibbs, whose grandpapa had filled the useful office of head-cook to Merton College, Oxford, shuddered at the notion of calling in so plebeian an auxiliary as Emma Watkins.

"One of the Rawlinsons? They are all pretty."

"Yes, but they are going immediately to Nice. The second girl is consumptive."

"Miss Violet Vavasour?"

"She is booked for a stall already. The deanery people snapped her up at once. And it is such a pity; for she is sure to draw customers by the hundred; and I'm sure dear Violet would rather have been on *my* side of the room, only she had promised them," said Mrs. Dibbs with unconscious egotism.

"I can show you where to find something prettier even than Violet Vavasour.

Look there—out of that window!” said Miss Billingsley, pointing to the merry group that now drew near the house, and to the beautiful girl, who fell into fifty graceful attitudes as she directed their sports.

“Lady Flavia Clare! Dear me, how stupid I was not to have remembered her before,” said Mrs. Dibbs naïvely. “But do you think, dear Lady Mortlake, that—that she would like——”

The countess took a minute or two to consider the matter. “I do not know *what* she would say,” was her answer; “she is very young, you see.”

“But if *you* don’t object?” pleaded Mrs. Dibbs; and the Ladies Caroline and Julia at once protested that the idea was a charming one. Lady Mortlake had no intention of opposing her veto to the general wish, for already there was a chorus of rejoicing over the discovery of so high-born

and attractive a recruit. But she really did not know how her young cousin might take the proposal. To sell penwipers, and fly-traps, and photographs for vulgar coin to motley strangers, might suggest degrading associations to Lady Flavia's mind, for aught the countess knew. It seemed to her like asking a princess to bare her white arms for the purpose of manipulating dough into a pudding-crust, or even into those famous unpeppered cream-tarts of Arabian story; a proposition that might be accepted with delight or rejected with anger, according to the fancy of the moment. However, she tapped at the window with the handle of her parasol, and smilingly beckoned to Lady Flavia to come in.

Lady Flavia came in, surrounded by two or three of the younger children, who clung to her skirts, and would not leave her. Her sweet face was a little flushed, or at

any rate, its delicate bloom was heightened, and her eyes sparkled; and with her flowing curls and animated look, she was lovely indeed. To the delight of Mrs. Dibbs, she readily agreed to take a stall at the approaching fair.

“Thank you for thinking of me!” she cried, in her simple way; and she laughed with childlike enjoyment at the prospect, as she said, of selling real things across a real counter for real gold and silver, and was wonderfully winning and sprightly, bringing more smiles to the faces of those fearfully-wise matrons and spinsters than often beamed there.

So, after lunch, when the countess’s carriage had driven off, and Miss Billingsley was tying her bonnet-strings, she said, by way of leave-taking: “There, dear Mrs. Dibbs—I don’t think, even with Violet Vavasour to help them, that the deanery people will cut you out now.”

And Mrs. Dibbs replied with genuine warmth, that Lady Flavia was “a sweet, darling little thing—more like an angel than anything else, if it wasn’t wrong to say so.”

Meanwhile the angel who formed the subject of Mrs. Dibbs’ eulogies was rolling rapidly homewards. The post, thanks to some casualty that would furnish an “alarming accident” to the daily papers that delight to treat of shuntings, and sidings, and point-switchings, was late. Lord Mortlake was at home, and was just unlocking the post-bag as the countess and the three girls arrived. The opening of the post-bag, and the distribution of the family correspondence, is an engrossing and delightful occupation to many and many a Paterfamilias; so it was to the earl. He did his sorting gently, like an elderly Ariel; but he looked twice at every letter before he let it out of his custody.

“Eh, eh!” said the earl; “Miss Stockings—who’s Miss Stockings? One of the maids, eh? Lady Mortlake—one, two, three; and one for Julia; five newspapers; a letter for Benson; one for Robert Brown—who’s he? Oh, the new stable-helper, is he? And, Flavia, there is one for you. You don’t give me much trouble in letter-sorting in general, missy.” And the good-natured old gentleman held out the letter, and placed it in Lady Flavia’s gloved hand. What he said was perfectly true. The late earl’s daughter, as was but natural on account of her secluded youth, had very few to write to her. She took her letter into the little hand that wore Number Six of Houbigant’s gloves; hands such as nobody else possessed, gloves such as nobody else inquired for, in all the county. She went straight up-stairs with it, nor did she open it until, half mechanically it would seem, she had closed and locked the door

of her room. She eyed the letter with a kind of wondering curiosity, and laughingly said, as she broke the seal : " Who can have written to me—to me, to whom no one writes ?" But from the moment that her eyes fell on the first lines of the letter, a change came over her fair face ; the smile died away on her lips, a strange, terror-stricken look was in her eyes, and her cheek grew paler as she read on. She looked then as she had done on that first night beneath the roof of Harbledown, months before, when she had watched while others were sleeping. The shadow of a Fear was upon her ; and yet there seemed no cause for such agitation in the letter before her. It was surely a very kind and affectionate little letter, and it ran thus :—

" MY OWN DEAREST FLAVIA,—Do you remember, love, when you and I used to talk in our little room at the convent,

looking down upon the great wood-pile and that noisy *basse-cour*, where old Marguerite did her best to keep order among the hens—do you remember, I say, how we two used to look forward to our meeting in the great world outside the gates? We used to think, I remember, that life outside would be all one long holiday, with no lessons, no piano-practice, no “il faut être sage, Mademoiselle,” from that weary Sister Agnes, or from the good, stiff, old Dame Supérieure. Well, dear, that happy time has come now. It came to you earlier, though I ought not to call *that* happy, as you only left us, darling, to go to the death-bed of your poor papa; and I assure you I lay awake, night after night, thinking of you, and how strange and sad everything must be to you in England, and how melancholy that great, grand house must be, when you found none but strangers to welcome you. Many a night I have waked up, and

spoken to you between sleeping and waking, and felt so sad and deserted to find your little bed empty, dear, and nobody in the room but poor, lonely me. I hope you won't think me selfish, dearest, but I was so sad, and so forlorn, when you were gone, and I was left the only English girl, the only Protestant in all the dreary place. I never liked it, you know, but then I did not come to Grèsnez when I was quite little, as you did. But there, dear child, it's quite over now; and I am so pleased to be on English ground again, and to have done with *school* for ever. My papa, Colonel Ford, has come back from India *for 'ever!* O Flavia! how I wish you could see him; he is the kindest, best, most generous of all the fathers in the world, and quite *spoils* me. He says he has to be father and mother too to me, and, indeed, his care and goodness are beyond all praise. And I am so happy now. But, dearest, one thing is

wanting to my happiness, and that is the sight of your sweet face, and the assurance that you love your little Amy still. You know we two are to be friends *always*. Have you forgotten what plans we made for the future, and what famous *châteaux en Espagne* we built. I hate writing, and yet I can hardly stop my pen; but I hear papa calling me, for we are to go to some sight or other. Where can we meet, dear? We are in London now, and in lodgings, in Minden Street, St. James's, Number Seventeen; but soon we are to take a house in the country; though I think I like London best. No more time. Mind you write soon, if only one line. You are a lazy puss, not to have written before. I *must* go; so with dear kind love and kisses to my own, own darling, ever her affectionate friend,
AMY FORD.

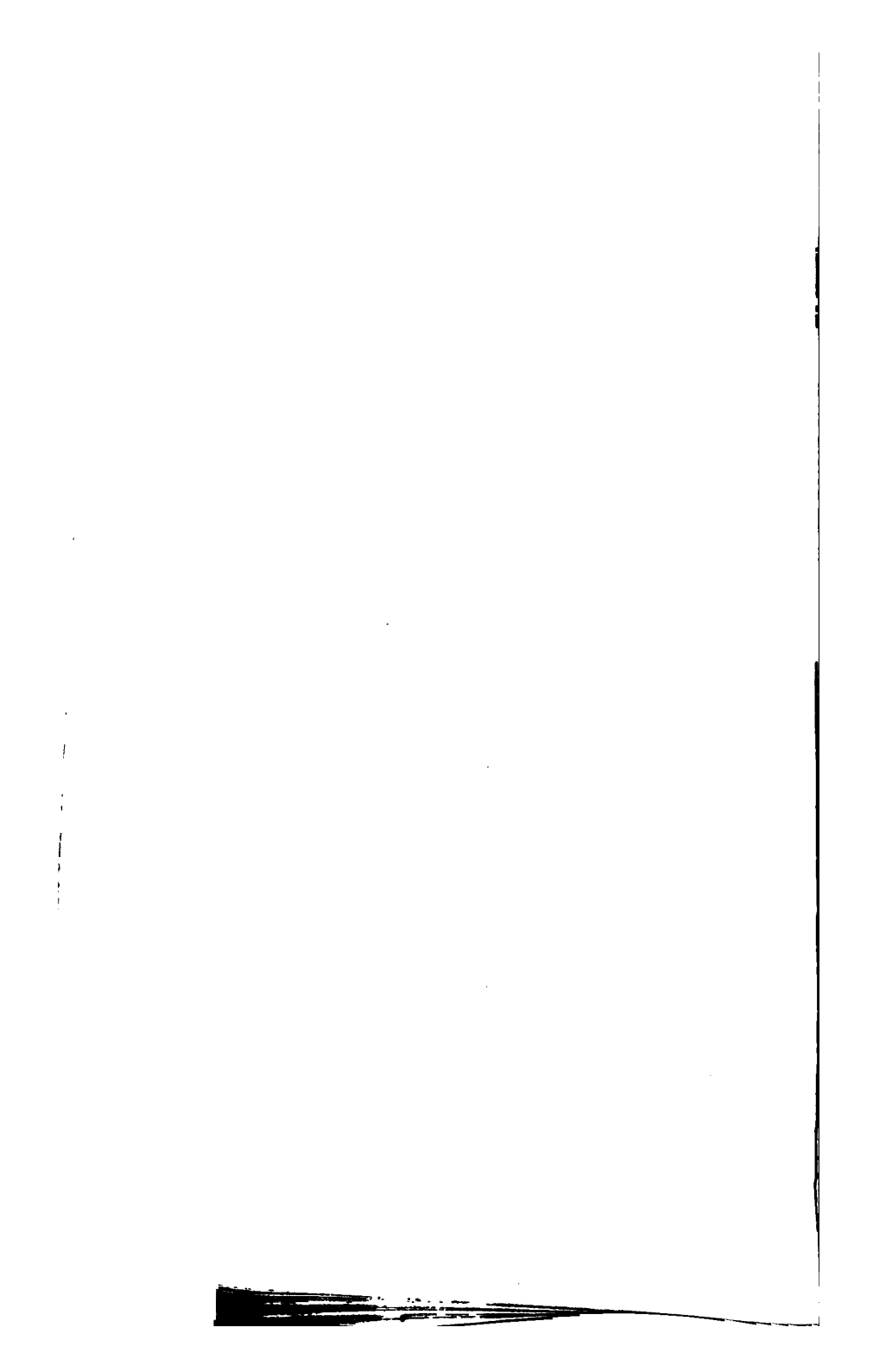
Lady Flavia Clare read this letter over

twice, and then yet a third time, and then the hand that held the paper dropped to her side ; and as she sat in the great arm-chair, gazing dreamily at the fire, her whole attitude expressed weary, hopeless discouragement. Minutes went by, and formed themselves into hours ; the hands of the clock travelled along the dial-plate ; the dark November afternoon became a dusky November evening, and still the mistress of the pretty pink rooms sat silently brooding over the fire, with the letter in her hand. After a long, long time she rose, tore the letter to fragments, tossed the scraps of paper into the fire, and with a sort of fierce intentness, watched them shrivel, and scorch, and blacken, and so vanish into nothingness. Then she gave a long sigh, and turned sadly away.

“It must come to an end at last,” she said ; “but when, and how ?” And she sat down in her old place, and remained

motionless, with her eyes on the fire, until her maid tapped at the door, and the dressing-bell rang. Lady Flavia rose and unlocked the door, and in the act of doing so, the beauty and candour of her bright young face seemed to return like those of the witch-maiden in *Christabel*. Simmons, observant as she was, saw not a trace of emotion in her lady's face as she busied herself in her duties. And when the earl's ward appeared at dinner, her loveliness had lost none of its charms; her spirits were high; she was the same fairy creature that, since they first knew her, had been the life and soul of the Harbledown household.

END OF VOL. I.





“Eh, eh !” said the earl ; “ Miss Stockings—who’s Miss Stockings ? One of the maids, eh ? Lady Mortlake—one, two, three ; and one for Julia ; five newspapers ; a letter for Benson ; one for Robert Brown—who’s he ? Oh, the new stable-helper, is he ? And, Flavia, there is one for you. You don’t give me much trouble in letter-sorting in general, missy.” And the good-natured old gentleman held out the letter, and placed it in Lady Flavia’s gloved hand. What he said was perfectly true. The late earl’s daughter, as was but natural on account of her secluded youth, had very few to write to her. She took her letter into the little hand that wore Number Six of Houbigant’s gloves ; hands such as nobody else possessed, gloves such as nobody else inquired for, in all the county. She went straight up-stairs with it, nor did she open it until, half mechanically it would seem, she had closed and locked the door

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“Eh, eh!” said the earl; “Miss Stockings—who’s Miss Stockings? One of the maids, eh? Lady Mortlake—one, two, three; and one for Julia; five newspapers; a letter for Benson; one for Robert Brown—who’s he? Oh, the new stable-helper, is he? And, Flavia, there is one for you. You don’t give me much trouble in letter-sorting in general, missy.” And the good-natured old gentleman held out the letter, and placed it in Lady Flavia’s gloved hand. What he said was perfectly true. The late earl’s daughter, as was but natural on account of her secluded youth, had very few to write to her. She took her letter into the little hand that wore Number Six of Houbigant’s gloves; hands such as nobody else possessed, gloves such as nobody else inquired for, in all the county. She went straight up-stairs with it, nor did she open it until, half mechanically it would seem, she had closed and locked the door

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looking down upon the great wood-pile and that noisy *basse-cour*, where old Marguerite did her best to keep order among the hens—do you remember, I say, how we two used to look forward to our meeting in the great world outside the gates? We used to think, I remember, that life outside would be all one long holiday, with no lessons, no piano-practice, no “il faut être sage, Mademoiselle,” from that weary Sister Agnes, or from the good, stiff, old Dame Supérieure. Well, dear, that happy time has come now. It came to you earlier, though I ought not to call *that* happy, as you only left us, darling, to go to the death-bed of your poor papa; and I assure you I lay awake, night after night, thinking of you, and how strange and sad everything must be to you in England, and how melancholy that great, grand house must be, when you found none but strangers to welcome you. Many a night I have waked up, and

spoken to you between sleeping and waking, and felt so sad and deserted to find your little bed empty, dear, and nobody in the room but poor, lonely me. I hope you won't think me selfish, dearest, but I was *so* sad, and so forlorn, when you were gone, and I was left the only English girl, the only Protestant in all the dreary place. I never liked it, you know, but then I did not come to Grèsnez when I was quite little, as you did. But there, dear child, it's quite over now; and I am so pleased to be on English ground again, and to have done with *school* for ever. My papa, Colonel Ford, has come back from India *for 'ever!* O Flavia! how I wish you could see him; he is the kindest, best, most generous of all the fathers in the world, and quite *spoils* me. He says he has to be father and mother too to me, and, indeed, his care and goodness are beyond all praise. And I am so happy now. But, dearest, one thing is

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